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WHERE
HELEN LIES

MARGARET LANE

WHERE
HELEN LIES

NEW YORK

DUELL, SLOAN AND PEARCE

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A WARTIME BOOK

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WHERE
HELEN LIES

Looking at his wife, Charles became aware that the legacy had not pleased her. Not needing it, receiving it as a pure windfall unearned and undeserved, and therefore capable, one would have thought, of being spent without guilt to gratify some special wish or buy some personal pleasure, she was dissatisfied with the amount; she expected legacies to make a permanent difference to one's life, and this one was too small; consequently the pleasure he had expected the news to give her was cancelled instantly by disappointment, and she felt instead only a vague rancour which she expressed by pretending to believe that his grandmother was a rich woman who had treated him shabbily.

"But where has the rest of it gone?" she said, opening her eyes wide, as one might at a riddle, "has she endowed a home for worn-out horses, or have the lawyers got it all?"

"The rest has been equally divided among the other five. There was only six thousand, apparently, when the death duties and everything were paid."

"Well, that's a miserable amount for the estate to have fetched. Has there been any funny business?"

"I shouldn't think so. It wasn't what you'd call an estate, except in the legal sense. It was only a biggish house with a good garden and a bit of farm; there wasn't much land."

"Oh, there was more than a garden, Charles, there was quite a park. And what about all her things? She had some very good furniture."

"Yes, I know, there were some nice pieces but there was a lot of rubbish as well. The pictures weren't worth anything. The house and land apparently fetched fifteen thousand, the furniture and things didn't make much difference."

"Fifteen thousand? Then you ought to have had between two and three thousand instead of one."

"No, there were some debts as well as the death duties. When everything was cleared up there was six thousand left between the grandchildren, so it has worked out very simply between the six of us."

"Debts?" said Isabella in a shocked voice, "but why on earth hadn't she paid those out of her income?"

"Perhaps she didn't know she was going to die."

"My darling boy, at ninety-one one ought to have an inkling."

"Yes, I expect she wasn't very businesslike."

"Well!" said Isabella, evidently appalled that an old lady of ninety-one should have the effrontery to owe anybody anything. She crossed her feet delicately in front of her and looked attentively at her husband as though waiting for him to furnish some more convincing explanation of his grandmother's delinquency.

"I never expected it to be very much," he said lamely, reproaching himself for the tone of apology which had been forced on him, the more so as he had himself been slightly disappointed by the inheritance.

"But she always seemed so well off," complained Isabella, her tone now frankly querulous, "I feel sure you really expected more, yourself. I feel positive you always expected it to be a good deal more."

"No, not really," said Charles, raising his eyebrows as though this would save him from slipping more and more deeply into apology, "the grandchildren were never to get anything more than the estate; and it's not the expensive part of Wales, it's not the holiday area. And her appearance of well-offness was all due to income, you know, and the capital of that goes straight to my aunts, under the marriage settlement."

Isabella sighed and took up her embroidery frame as though she washed her hands of so stupid an arrangement. "Very nice indeed for your aunts," she said pleasantly.

Charles leaned his head back against the sofa cushion and closed his eyes. The legacy was a failure. Instead of a delightful wind-fall, an unlooked-for prize which might have been welcomed with pleasure, it now appeared as a source of argument and irritation, transformed by Isabella's displeased surprise into something requiring explanation and apology, for all the world as though his grandmother—so affectionately alive always to family sentiment and innocently proud of acting generously by her children's children—had bequeathed him an insult. He felt aggrieved and suddenly hopeless, resentful on his grandmother's behalf, with whom and with the house in Wales so many of the magic unrepeatable impressions of his boyhood were identified, but too familiar with the atmosphere of all such arguments to attempt to rehabilitate her motives, to restore charm and generosity to her bequest, turned so suddenly worthless at Isabella's unerring touch. He took refuge in silence, letting his face settle resignedly into lines of fatigue in a scarcely conscious attempt to appear more tired than he was and so comfort himself by evoking his wife's ministering aspect. But Isabella, reading the signs when she glanced up enquiringly from her embroidery, preferred otherwise to interpret them.

"Poor darling," she said, "I've offended you. How horrid of me. But you mustn't think I'm not pleased; I am, very. It'll be awfully useful, we must make a list of things we can do at once. We can finish paying off for the central heating, for instance, and then there's Day's bill, that's still about two hundred, and I expect you've got a lot of oddments it would be nice to settle." Her soothing tone revealed to a nicety her real motive, which was not to make amends, but by briskly disposing of his grandmother's gift among builders and tradesmen to belittle it still further. In spite of himself Charles instantly swallowed the bait.

"But I don't want to fritter it away like that, with nothing to show. They're all getting paid off regularly, we're not in any difficulty."

"Well, pop it in the bank, then, darling, it'll come in useful."

"But I don't want it to come in useful in that sense. It'd just disappear in the same way, with nothing to show for it, which seems ungrateful, somehow, and disappointing. I'd rather spend it on something we really want."

"Well, we wanted the sun porch and we haven't finished paying for it."

"We soon shall have. Besides, that'd be nibbling again. I'd rather keep the whole thing for something special."

"But darling, it isn't a sum that fits anything very important, is it? If it were three times the amount you could put it by for Philip's education."

"Or Miriam's," said Charles, closing his eyes so as not to intercept Isabella's brilliant glance, the quick look of a woman who has recognised a hostile move but wishes to be doubly certain before replying to it. Charles was so familiar with these searching glances, and so unsure of his ability to meet them with innocence, that he had developed as a defence the mannerism of shutting his eyes whenever he said anything likely to provoke one; with the result that Isabella always knew, when he closed his eyes, that what he said was a thrust and not an accident, and brought up reinforcements accordingly.

"If you think," said Isabella after a pause, "that what would please your grandmother most would be to spend her money on a child for whom you've already done more than enough, and who isn't even your own, I should do that, of course. I should certainly do it."

"You're very scrupulous all of a sudden about pleasing my grandmother. It obviously can't please or displease her, since she can't know. But it might please *me*."

Isabella was silent. To her, an expression of benevolence towards Miriam could imply nothing but a lack of it towards Philip, and she was saddened by Charles's unnatural tendency to take Miriam's part in any discussion or argument concerning the children. The quarrel was an old one, dating from Philip's birth more than nine years ago, but had only recently developed from an unexpressed annoyance into an open difference. Philip was their own child and Miriam was not; she had been adopted eighteen months before the boy's birth, when Isabella believed herself incapable of having children, and already sensed that a child would be the best insurance against a possible failure of her marriage. Charles had agreed to the adoption, but without enthusiasm, since he too had been aware of dissatisfaction and disappointment and for that

very reason had not been anxious for an additional tie. He had since forgotten his reluctance, or pretended to forget it, but Isabella remembered and considered that it made his present championship of Miriam all the more unreasonable. To her, Philip's birth had made Miriam unnecessary, and since the child had developed neither good looks nor any characteristic congenial to Isabella, she had first of all regretted her and then found her a nuisance, an unescapable obligation undertaken in generosity and repented at leisure. Charles's attitude to the children was less simply explained; since explanation would have been painful he had never attempted to justify it, and Isabella was withheld from understanding by her own resentment. She knew that he was influenced by a sense of justice, that he had been well aware of her real, though unexpressed, reason for the adoption, and that he thought it wrong to procure a child for one's own ends and then allow her to be superseded when those ends were suddenly better served by another; but what she did not know, or would not recognise, was that Miriam had genuinely taken her place in Charles's affections, whereas a period of emotional suffering through which he had been passing at the time of Philip's birth and for several years afterwards had in an obscure way divorced his natural feelings from the boy, who had grown up as his mother's child almost exclusively. Charles now, intent as always upon self-protection, never looked back on that unhappy period of his life, and on the easily accessible surfaces of his mind had succeeded in forgetting it; but the fine skin which had grown with time over his memory bore several marks, indicating the scars of a deeper trouble, and his habit of fighting Miriam's battle against maternal preference was the most pronounced and visible of these surface irregularities.

"Darling," said Isabella after a long pause, "I don't see why you shouldn't spend *some* of the money on Miriam, but it really would be silly to spend it *all*. I know your grandmother can't know, but if she could, wouldn't she agree that it was silly? You can't have any possible reason for discriminating against Philip."

"There's been discrimination already. Your mother's already provided lavishly for Philip, whereas Miriam has nothing."

"But that won't come into effect until Mother's death, and she's

still quite a young woman. Besides, she might have lost it all by then, you know what she's like. Anyway, she's a realist, you couldn't expect her to leave money to a child who's nothing to her, and who's already had far more done for her than her own parents can ever have dreamed of."

"How do you know what they dreamed of? You don't even know who they were, let alone their circumstances."

"Oh yes, I do," said Isabella, and immediately blushed, and bent her head over her embroidery. Charles, still lying back on the sofa with his hands in his pockets, looked at her suspiciously.

"What do you mean? Have you been finding out about them? I thought that was what you made such a point about, that you didn't want to know."

"Oh, darling, I've known for a long time. They're still alive, the matron told me all about them. I rather wish she hadn't; that's why I never told you. But you needn't worry that they're anything but what the parents of adopted children usually are. They run depressingly to form."

Charles looked incredulous.

"Good God, when did you find all this out? You're perfectly extraordinary! The whole condition you made was that you shouldn't know, that there shouldn't be any contact." This was true: Isabella's frame of mind at the time of the adoption had been a mixture of possessiveness and fear; anxious to create the fiction that the child was their own and therefore a bond, and jealous of the idea of the real parents and their power to destroy this important myth and even her own pleasure in possession, she had made it a condition of adoption that their identity should be kept a secret, while insisting only on guarantees of health and good heredity from the adoption society. The society had been sympathetic and tactful, and the matron of the babies' home had fully understood the reservations of a childless woman who wished, by the legal act of adoption, to deny her childlessness; so that nothing had been known of Miriam's parents but their names and signatures and the fact that they were healthy, and their very existence, once the chosen baby had come home, had been carefully forgotten.

"Oh, I know," said Isabella, "but that was a long time ago, and it can't make any difference now, can it?"

"No, it can't," said Charles crossly, "but I wish all the same you hadn't done it."

He closed his eyes again, frowning, and they sat in a silence broken only by the light tick of Isabella's thimble. The knowledge of Miriam's parentage hung between them, and both, for different reasons, decided to ignore it. Isabella regarded it as a useful shot which, properly aimed, might one day have effect, but which to-day, in face of Charles's irritable defensiveness, would be wasted ammunition. Charles for his part, feeling the whole subject to be ominous and unpleasant, preferred to ask no questions and to deprive Isabella of the satisfaction of diminishing Miriam still further. He had become adept at smothering his curiosity when he knew that his wife was prepared with destructive answers, and Isabella was equally skilful at holding her reserves. So the revelation was postponed, and they sat on in silence while Isabella stitched at her embroidery and the china clock on the mantelpiece ticked pleasantly.

After a time Charles, his eyes still closed, became aware of the ticking, and remembered the grandfather clock in his grandmother's hall, the clock whose brass face would still have appeared to him as the face of a friend, the first clock face with which he had had personal relations. It had had, in common with everything else in his grandmother's house, an air of having stood in its place for ever, of having grown in the house and belonging to it like a vital organ, so that it was impossible to imagine it uprooted, labelled and suffering the indignities of the sale room, transplanted to a strange corner of a strange hall where nobody would know it. Everything in his grandmother's house had had this personal quality, this appearance of being an irremovable part of the whole, logically necessary to the rooms and the life that went on in them; so much so that it seemed it could not be only the visual certainty of childhood which had produced the impression, but that its truth must be equally apparent to a stranger. Yet, if it were not merely the freshness of boyhood vision which had created the illusion, why did the rooms of his own house, with which by now he must be far more familiar, fail to achieve that reassuring permanence and inevitability? It was not simply a question of time. He had had the house in London for fourteen years, and the elaborate cottage in which they

sat had been the background of weekends and holidays for more than half as long; and neither place seemed to have engendered any real life of its own, or to have emerged from the initial stage of raw material for Isabella's decorations. Considering this, Charles felt that he had a clue, and in a moment would be able to put his finger on the difference. His grandmother's house had the advantage that it did not change, save in the slow accretion of detail in the course of a lifetime; but it was more than this; it was unself-conscious, and though there might be much in it that was cumbrous or unbeautiful or useless it had grown together through a natural process into a living whole, as perfect a background to his grandmother's existence as the rock is to the fern; whereas his own house, on which Isabella's creative intelligence was always ceaselessly at work, was a series of rooms, perhaps perfect in themselves, but independent of the life lived in them and even hostile to it. "The house has nothing to do with me," he thought. "I have never grown into it. I am simply a superfluous detail imposed on Isabella's work of art."

He opened his eyes cautiously and considered her. There she sat, beautifully composed and still, her head bent, the lamp shining downwards along a wing of her smooth hair and on one side of the short straight catlike nose which was such a charm of her face. Only her hands moved, plucking the needle up through the round tambour frame with a soft sound and sending it thoughtfully down again through the bright knot of flowers. She was interesting to look at, always, a charming blend of good looks and sophisticated taste: the most critical eye, Charles thought, could find no flaw there, and yet this perfection had long since ceased to move him. Like the room they sat in it lacked spontaneity: there was no happy chance to stir the imagination; it was too well thought out.

"I wonder," said Isabella suddenly, looking up, "whether your grandmother had some special idea about how you were to use the money?" She had been busy all the time with the thousand pounds, but now her tone was propitiating, as though she were slightly ashamed of her querulous attitude, and anxious to make amends and coax him back into discussion.

"I don't think so. I think she only meant to leave all her grand-

children something, as a sort of remembrance. She was very fond of us."

"You were the favourite, though, weren't you?" said Isabella. "I remember the long letters she used to send you."

"I think that was only because she knew me the best. I spent more holidays there than the others did, being the only one without parents. I always spent the summer holidays in Wales all the time I was at school."

"Yes, that's what makes it so odd that she didn't leave you something special, something different from the others. Are you sure she didn't?"

"Pretty sure. At least, I think if she hadn't died so suddenly she meant me to have her writing desk and one or two other things that I was rather fond of. Sentimental values, you'd call them; they didn't amount to anything."

"Well, but what's happened to them?"

"They'll have gone in the sale, I suppose, with the rest of the contents. Or my aunts may have kept them."

"I remember something about the desk; didn't she once mention it in a letter? What was it like?"

"Early Victorian, mahogany, very attractive, with a sort of little brass balustrade round the top and lions' heads for drawer knobs. It was always the lions that fascinated me as a boy."

Isabella glanced involuntarily round the room, trying to place it. It would be better in Montpelier Square, perhaps, an amusing addition to the earlier Regency pieces.

"It sounds charming. Can't you get it out of your aunts? I don't suppose they've sold it."

"Oh, I don't imagine they'd know she ever meant me to have it. I wouldn't want to nag them about it."

"But darling, it wouldn't be nagging. They'd want you to have it if they knew. I'm sure she said something about it in a letter, ages ago. I'm certain I remember it. Round about the time she was so ill, and you'd been to see her. And there were some other things as well, I'm almost positive."

"Yes, there were. I've still got the letter somewhere. But I really don't think it's worth making a fuss about now."

"Oh, but it *is*. Your aunts have done awfully well out of it, you know. Could you find the letter?"

"I dare say. I can't be bothered. It's probably in one of those tin boxes upstairs. That is, if it was written more than five years ago. All her later letters are in the filing cabinet in town."

"Well, let *me* go and look," said Isabella, putting down her embroidery and looking pleased and animated. "I've got to go upstairs to the children anyhow. I'll bring the box down with me."

Charles smiled, amused in spite of himself by the childishness with which Isabella was prepared to be satisfied with an old-fashioned writing-desk extorted from his aunts when she had been so obviously disappointed with the thousand pounds. "If you like," he said; "but I don't promise to do anything about it even if you find it."

Isabella got lightly to her feet and touched his cheek indulgently with her finger. "I want you to have your lion desk," she said.

On the landing she stopped, and her pleased expression, the expression of a child who has been sent to fetch an exciting parcel, faded. Miriam was not in bed. She was there in her dressing-gown, hanging a long way out of the narrow casement window, a felt slipper dangling from one heel. The window was too small to fall out of, but Isabella put a quick hand on the cord of her dressing-gown before she spoke.

"Miriam! What on earth are you doing?" The child drew herself in suddenly, banging her head as she did so, and stood nervously putting her straight hair behind her ear with a long hand. All the features which Isabella found so disappointing and therefore irritating, her plainness, her thinness, the straightness of her hair and the fact that she was already taller than anybody in the house except Charles, were painfully apparent, and Isabella felt with a renewed pang the hopelessness of having undertaken this child for ever. Nothing would make her sympathetic or attractive; nothing, nothing. And she was not even fond of one. Her smile had that false look of nervous propitiation which Isabella found particularly exasperating.

"I was just going to bed," said Miriam, looking over Isabella's head and hiding her hands in the pockets of her dressing-gown.

"But you ought to have been in bed an hour ago! What's that in your hand?"

"It's only my torch." She brought out a small electric torch and showed it.

"And what were you doing hanging out of the window with a torch? Do you know what time it is?"

Miriam looked politely at her wristwatch. "It's a quarter past ten," she said. "I was only looking at a spider."

"Where?" said Isabella quickly, her face contracting with the nervous horror of a person to whom all insects are diabolical.

"It's outside the window, up in the corner. It's been there all summer."

"How perfectly disgusting," said Isabella. "Now go to bed. Why didn't you tell Mrs. Swann to sweep it down? It'll come into the house."

"It won't, honestly," said Miriam. "It doesn't do any harm. It's quite useful, it catches a lot of flies. It's got awfully big the last few weeks. I think it's a female."

"How you *can*," said Isabella distastefully, and went on upstairs. Miriam followed resignedly, pausing to shine her torch into her mouth as she passed the long mirror outside Isabella's bedroom.

"You needn't be afraid of it, really," she said as she got into bed, her desire to communicate the spider's interesting habits getting the better of her discretion. "It's ever so intelligent. When it catches more flies than it wants to eat it wraps them up like cellophane parcels and hangs them up in the corner."

"Good heavens, do stop talking about that spider. I never heard of anything so disgusting."

Miriam looked at her with large melancholy eyes over the eiderdown.

"It isn't disgusting, really. It's been there for months and it never comes into the house. Philip likes it, too."

"I won't have you teaching Philip nasty habits. Now go to sleep and let's have no more silly fuss about pet spiders. Those caterpillars of yours in the shed are bad enough."

Miriam said nothing, and did not respond to the light kiss which

Isabella forced herself to give before she turned out the light. Isabella always bestowed this kiss, but with increasing difficulty, for one of the results of Miriam's disappointingness, her superfluity, and the unavailability of her permanent presence, was that the child was becoming even physically repulsive to her, and she was haunted by the fear that she was getting neurotic about it and that there was no escape. How horribly typical of Miriam to like spiders! She was always bringing home disgusting worms and caterpillars and then moping about in tears when they got thrown away. She would probably want to keep pet snakes if she could only get hold of any. Isabella shuddered, and went into Philip's bedroom with a sense of relief.

Philip was asleep and looking wonderful, as he always did. The light did not wake him. Isabella could never look at him enough, and her favourite moments of gazing were when he was asleep, and she could yearn over him without meeting his disconcerting stare or being asked in an impersonal tone what she was looking at. She leaned over his bed, involuntarily smiling, and tenderly drew the blankets up to his shoulders. He was sleeping almost on his face, the small dark head lying centrally in the pillow, his short nose almost buried and his left ear, the one which was uppermost, looking rather red. It was impossible, thought Isabella as the tension of her annoyance relaxed and the warm peace of Philip's unconsciousness touched her, impossible for even a stranger not to see the cruel contrast between the children. If only she had waited! Philip alone would have smoothed away old difficulties and the new ones with which wretched Miriam bristled would never have existed. Sighing, she turned out the light, and went softly up the little passage to the box-room.

In the doorway she paused, not knowing where to begin. She and Charles used the box-room for different purposes, and the resulting confusion was considerable. To Isabella a box-room was a box-room, a place where one kept luggage in orderly stacks, perhaps a spare piece of furniture or a rolled mattress, and in summer a fur coat or two in aromatic moth-proof covers. To Charles, on the other hand, a box-room had no limits; he approached it like a magpie and used it as an oubliette. In it he concealed, and forgot, everything that he could not bring himself to part with, which

was to say very nearly everything which passed through his possession. The tide of his hoardings from time to time swept up to Isabella's neat reserves and overwhelmed them, but she had long ago given up the struggle to make him throw anything away, and as an indulgence contented herself with a quarter of the room, throwing up a barricade of cabin trunks which Charles usually respected. She rarely attempted to penetrate his private jungle, and now stood in some dismay, her eyes ranging over the irregular deposits of bags, boxes, fishing rods, old boots and cameras, books, papers, letters, Christmas wrapping paper, pictures, empty bottles, maps, shooting sticks, photographs, catalogues and all the other miscellanea which had either been too good to throw away, or, by his other formula, might one day come in useful. His hoarding was of a peculiar kind, and seemed to be for its own sake, since he rarely returned to anything he had kept, and usually forgot anything he had put there as soon as he had balanced it on the nearest pyramid and shut the door on it. Yet his habit had its occasional uses, since in every thousand letters or catalogues there is generally one which one would have been glad to keep, and as Charles kept everything, though in a disorderly and forgetful fashion, it was sometimes possible to recover a missing clue such as his grandmother's letter. The difficulty was always to get him to disturb the crust; his dislike of reawakening the past—itsself a trait incomprehensible to Isabella, who loved reminiscence—made him reluctant ever to explore its personal residues, although some equally unexplained emotion compelled him to preserve them. In this way his grandmother's letters would be all retained, and never read, and Isabella made a slight grimace at the prospect of unearthing them.

She picked her way over several nameless bundles, negotiated a tottering pyramid of books which she was careful not to disturb, and opened a large black tin box which was reasonably near the door. It was full of old receipted bills and cheque stubs. A little further in she located letters, packed quite tidily into a grocer's box and covered with newspaper. She knelt down on a canvas fishing bag and began to go through them.

Mixed as they were, business letters as well as private stuffed down with old records of picture sales, catalogues of exhibitions

and transactions of the gallery, they had the fascination of all buried relics, and Isabella was very slow in her search, sitting back on her heels to read a page here and there or puzzle over a paragraph. At the bottom was a layer of the children's school reports, and she read these with mingled pride and annoyance, resenting the Olympian tone of the preparatory school masters whose initials followed a condescending commendation of Philip's French, or who thought it worth while recording that a little boy of eight or nine did not apply himself. There were no letters from Charles's grandmother in this collection.

In the third, however, half hidden under a mass of bills and dusty newspaper cuttings, she found the regular sloping handwriting she was looking for, and settled down to skim through the close pages of forgotten trivialities which Charles had so mysteriously thought worth preserving. "You will be sorry to hear that poor Flo went to ground after a badger last Thursday and got her lower jaw most dreadfully torn. Ethel bicycled in for the vet immediately and he was very good and came at once and put in five stitches. She is better today but I am afraid still feels considerable pain in eating. . . ." Dear, funny Charles. But then, he never looked at these old letters. He couldn't really care what had happened to his grandmother's spaniel? She went on turning the pages and skipping, and at last her attention was riveted. "I have been thinking very pleasantly about your last visit, and also about the happy times you used to spend here as a little boy, and I feel that this is the moment to say that if anything happens to me, as of course it must, I would like you to have, quite apart from your share in the estate, some personal mementoes from among the things I know you used to like. The mahogany escritoire with the lion's head handles will of course be for you, and the bunch of seals, and, if you still like it as much as you used to do, the hall clock, though of course I realise that people live in smaller houses nowadays, and that unless you had plenty of room it would perhaps seem cumbrous, in which case I dare say your Aunt Gertrude would gladly give it a home. . . ."

Well, that was it. There could be no argument now. Aunt Gertrude had probably got the desk, and of course Charles must have

it. It would be charming in the morning room, set in the window overlooking the square, just what had always been needed to carry off the alabaster lion paper-weight which had been amusing but slightly out of its element on the hall table. Isabella folded the letter triumphantly, and then, gathering up the unwanted ones to replace them, was arrested by seeing her own handwriting at the bottom of the box. A letter from herself, on her mother's thick coroneted notepaper? Good heavens, but that must be years and years ago, before Mother's second marriage. She picked it out, and was startled by the date, inscribed compactly at the top in a youthfully meticulous over-decorated hand— "May the 19th, 1925." It was the first letter she had ever written to Charles, cautious, polite, deliberately gay and social so that he should not suspect the impression he had made. She read it through with a mixed sensation of pleasure and discomfort, then looked in the box for more. He had kept them all. She sat down on the floor and went through the bundle, her cheeks tingling. How sweet, how touching of Charles to have kept her letters, even though he had probably by now forgotten their existence and had certainly never looked at them for years. She had kept most of his, it was true, and even glanced at them occasionally when she turned out her desk, but that was somehow different. It was more significant, because more unlikely in view of all that had happened since, that Charles should have prized and kept these relics of their courtship. Perhaps, after all, he had kept them only because he had forgotten them, and the silt of his grandmother's correspondence had covered them up. Reading them again was a strangely disconcerting pleasure. They recalled so much, they pointed such a difference between then and now, seemed so callow, so full of certainties and hopes so laboriously expressed, a little embarrassing in the light of mature judgment and fourteen years' closer knowledge. Yet they were touching, too, like a scene in an old news-reel long forgotten but instantly familiar, and as she read Isabella was warmed and softened into a mood demanding immediate expression. She would go down at once to Charles with his grandmother's letter and be nice about the legacy. He should spend it all on himself if he chose, on a holiday or some really disgrace-

ful extravagance; she would insist on his being pleased with it and enjoying it. After all, it was only on his behalf that she was disappointed; she didn't want the money.

Rustling the letters together with a pleased and determined air she caught sight of a large manila envelope at the bottom of the box, and paused. She turned it over with her free hand and saw that it was sealed, and knelt for several seconds without moving, as though the careful disc of red wax had suggested something. Slowly she put down her own letters and picked up the envelope, turning it over thoughtfully in her hands. There was nothing written on it. It was full of papers or letters, it had been heavily sealed, and the outside was blank.

Isabella sat back on her heels, breathing lightly, and stared in front of her at a pile of old magazines surmounted by a pair of dusty shoes and a tennis racquet. Were they more letters of her own, sealed up in a moment of tenderness or prudence, or were they documents of which Charles had forced himself to be careful—the deeds of the London house, the lease of the gallery, or his insurance policies? But even Charles kept everything of that sort at the bank, or at least in his filing cabinet. Then surely it was more of her own or his grandmother's letters, the more intimate and precious ones which he had not wanted Mrs. Swann to see if she should ever—unlikely thought—take it into her head to turn out the box-room? Isabella brought her gaze back to the envelope and pinched it, making the thick paper crackle. Deliberate secrecy was written all over its blank face, and suddenly, without considering further, since she knew that no amount of consideration would justify the action and because she meant to open it in any case, Isabella broke the seal and drew out a compact bundle of folded letters.

She knew the writing at once, though she had not seen it for ten years, and a wave of alarm swept over her, blotting out the handwriting in a momentary blindness of shock, though in her bones she had known, from the first moment of seeing the sealed envelope, what it must contain. The wave subsided, leaving her slightly shaken, and the round clear childish writing, wastefully spaced across cheap paper which might have been torn from an exercise book, took shape again and became clear. "My dear love,"

she saw, and frowned, telling herself that the pain of reading these letters would be greater than any satisfaction of curiosity. But it was no good, and she knew it. She was lost, drawn on by a wincing curiosity which she had thought long dead, but which had wakened at a touch and more ravenously than in the past, unchecked now by the old fears which had been so comfortably forgotten. She crouched almost motionless in the same position, her knee pressing painfully against a buckle of the fishing bag, until she had read the letters from first to last.

When she had done, she was surprised to find herself elated as well as shaken. It had been alarming, that first plunge into those untidy pages, not knowing what life might still be dormant in them or what blow they might deal her; she had felt breathless and a little sick, and her eyes had flown over the writing. But they had been like other love letters, meagre and a little absurd, the sting taken out of them by that note of unreality, almost of insincerity, which makes other people's love letters and even and perhaps particularly one's own, after a lapse of time, so difficult to believe in. Isabella had felt a certain relief as she read on, spoiled only here and there by a momentary anger over some personal reference or by the too clear assumption that it was to the writer and not to herself that Charles's life was turned. Ah, well, time had seen to that all right, assisted perhaps by a little adroit strategy. The last letter was dated more than ten years ago, and was obviously the tail-piece of the collection. It had been a bad spell, certainly, and her own tactics at the beginning had been too self-assured, too confidently indulgent; but it had been got under control without much loss of time, it had never really been out of her hands for more than a moment. Suddenly she remembered with great distinctness her mother's expression when for the first time she had let her see that she minded Charles's love affair, that she was getting frightened; the ironical look in the blue, heavy-lidded eyes, the faintly mocking tone in which she had answered, "But darling, if you *mind* . . . if it's getting out of hand, of course you're going entirely the wrong way about it." After that Mother had been wonderful, no-one could have been better; and if at times she had seemed to enjoy it a little too much, if there had been moments when it was still uncertain whose side she was

really on, Charles's or Isabella's or simply (as usual) her own, she had brought all her splendid talent to bear on the problem, so that it had been solved, as Isabella had to admit, more quickly and finally than could have been possible without her.

It had been quite final, luckily, and it was now ten years ago; her marriage had been whipped back within the tidy limits she had intended for it, and had struggled no further; but the rape of the letters had so startled her, had so thoroughly wakened that part of her mind which could leave no situation alone until she had control of it, that she was incapable of going downstairs to Charles as though nothing had happened. She put them neatly together with his grandmother's letter and went down quickly, humming a tune to prove to herself that she was perfectly steady.

Charles had put on his spectacles and was reading the Sunday paper. He glanced up with a look of enquiry, but pleasant, placating; he too had had time to regret the slight wrangle, and was willing to be cosy and plotting about the desk if that was what she wanted.

"I've found it," said Isabella cheerfully, advancing to the sofa and bending over his newspaper to give him a light preparatory kiss on the forehead.

"Well, that's nice. I'm afraid it must have given you a lot of trouble."

"It was child's play, considering. I only had to delve through three crates of rubbish and documents before I came to it."

"Wonderful. Let me see what she says."

Isabella gave him the letter and sat down on the hearthrug with the others in her lap, and began poking the fire.

"What else have you got there?" said Charles in a suspicious voice.

"Oh darling, I believe a romantic discovery." She held the letters up, playfully, but out of his reach. "I was looking for your grandmother everywhere, and out popped this collection. I know who they're from, don't I?"

Charles looked first hostile, then defeated.

"I suppose you do," he said. "Why did you bring them down?"

"I don't quite know," said Isabella candidly. "I think I wanted to ask you if I could look at them."

"Haven't you looked at them already," said Charles, "upstairs? Isn't that why you were such a long time?"

"Of *course* I haven't," said Isabella indignantly, and then laughed. "Darling, don't be piggish. There they were in an envelope, unmarked, they might have been anything. I didn't read them, but I wasn't quite heroic enough to put them back."

Charles roused himself, and laid his newspaper aside. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I really don't want you to read them. What's the point of stirring up ancient quarrels? Give them to me."

"Darling, it was never a quarrel. How unkind of you to put it like that. I'm sure nobody could have been more sympathetic and human than I was, in the circumstances."

"All the same, it really would be pointless to read them. There can't be anything in them that you don't know, unless you've forgotten. It was so long ago." He held out his hand for the letters, but Isabella was gazing into the fire.

"I wonder why you've kept them?" she said at last in a detached voice, carefully free from anxiety or reproach.

"I don't know. I didn't even know they were there. I haven't thought of them for years."

"Darling, I'm not blaming you. I think relics of that sort are terribly interesting. I wish I'd kept all the letters of my youth. I should simply love looking at them now and I shouldn't mind you seeing them a bit."

"I dare say, but I'm sure I shouldn't want to. I haven't got your scientific detachment. I never want to rake up what's forgotten."

"Oh, you must want to, really," said Isabella, smiling at him, "or you wouldn't keep such thousands of letters. You've even kept mine."

"You aren't forgotten. That's the difference."

"Thank you. But you keep others as well, darling. That's no argument. You obviously have a very strong feeling for the past, or you wouldn't be such a magpie."

"Magpies don't remember what they've kept," said Charles. "It's a form of burial."

Isabella laughed.

"I think it's really more complicated than that." She shuffled the bundle of letters in her lap. "Mayn't I read them, please? It's really

and truly only interest, after all this time. I'm not a scrap jealous, I really shan't want to make a scene when I've finished. It's just frightfully interesting, psychologically. Mayn't I, darling?"

"I'd rather you didn't. There's nothing to conceal, but it just seems a stupid and rather indelicate idea. It goes against the grain, somehow."

"All right," said Isabella. "How nice and old-fashioned you're being. You make me feel they must be terribly worth reading."

"I assure you they're not. I don't know why I kept them."

"Well, shall I burn them, then? If you won't let me read them, and if you don't want them yourself, what's the good of keeping them? Let's cremate the lot."

There was a pause, during which Isabella gazed steadfastly into the fire.

"If you like," said Charles at last. "Yes, why not? I really must have a proper turnout in the box-room one of these days."

Isabella put one of the letters into the fire, and Charles, suddenly unable to bear the slow ritualism with which she was settling down to enjoy herself, got up and pretended to look for a book on the other side of the room. He felt suddenly out of breath, as though the room had grown hot, and longed to go out into the garden and walk about; but this was impossible because Isabella would immediately read the remainder of the letters (if she had not already done so upstairs, which was hardly probable) and, which would be even worse, would construe his sudden going out as an act of drama, and would be eager to plumb the depths as soon as he came back. So he contented himself with drawing back the curtain from an open window, and when he was sure that the last of the letters was in the fire came back to the sofa with a book.

Isabella was looking pleased but not altogether satisfied. "There," she said brightly, "that's the lot. Unless you've got another cache somewhere, darling, secure from prying eyes?"

"No, I'm sure that's all. The holocaust's complete."

"Haven't you ever heard from her since, then?" Isabella had reached the crux of her investigations, and sat very still, watching the curling tinder.

"No," said Charles, turning the pages of his book.

"Not even occasionally? Not even once?"

"Not even once."

"How extraordinary," said Isabella. "What is she doing now?"

"I've no idea."

"Don't you even know where she is?"

"No."

"Don't you ever hear of her from other people? Don't the Pillows know?"

"I've never asked them."

Isabella looked up and studied her husband's face. He looked calm, absorbed, perhaps faintly impatient at not being left to his book. The conversation was annoying him. Oh well, she was quite willing to let it drop. There really seemed to be nothing fresh to learn. The subject had simply been revived, had passed into her hands without resistance, and had been successfully disposed of. Any further discussion would be useless, and would betray, besides, a damaging anxiety. She got up and lit a cigarette and went back to her embroidery.

Charles, aware of her movements without watching them, began to breathe more evenly. He had been right to suppress the irritable interruptions he had longed for— "Why do we have to go into all this again? . . . For God's sake let's change the subject"—since these would certainly have led Isabella to believe that he was less indifferent than he seemed, and she would have started probing. But resentment and a kind of futile defiance went on muttering inside his head, suggesting first one and then another course of disagreeable action. They sat on in silence for nearly half an hour, and Isabella noticed that he turned his pages slowly.

"About the desk," she said at last in a helpful tone, "will you write to your Aunt Gertrude about it, or would you like me to?"

"Thank you, I can see to it."

"Well, do, darling; I know your grandmother would like it."

Charles did not reply.

"And about the money," Isabella went on, in a coaxing, rewarding voice, "why don't you spend it on something you really want? Something for yourself."

Charles put down his book abruptly and considered her.

"What do you suggest?"

"I don't know, darling, it's for you to say. Why don't you take a really expensive holiday?"

"Should you mind if I did?"

"Mind? Of course not! I should be delighted," said Isabella, realising instantly that he had read the suggestion as meaning a holiday without her.

"It's not a bad idea," said Charles. "I could certainly do with it, I've been tired to death for months. I might take Miriam."

"No, you couldn't do that. She'd miss the beginning of term."

"Couldn't I? What makes you think I couldn't if I decided to?"

"Oh well, if you put it like that . . . I only meant that she wouldn't be the very jolliest company. I don't think you'd enjoy it."

"But *she* might," said Charles. "She doesn't have much fun, does she? I think it might be a lot of fun for both of us."

A little at a loss, Isabella consulted his expression. The obstinate look was there, defying her to make objections, and she realised that the moment was one for compliance. Besides, there were certain advantages in the arrangement. Her instincts told her that a solitary holiday was an idea always to be discouraged, the sort of thing one praised theoretically and never allowed to happen; it could never have any but undesirable results. But Miriam's presence would be a sort of guarantee, both of Charles's intentions and of his good behaviour; nothing interesting could be contemplated with that dead weight for company.

"Well, I shouldn't find it amusing, but then it's not my holiday. How long would you go for?"

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it. Perhaps a month?"

"A month! Oh, darling, you'd never support it. And you'd hardly have any time at home before Mother arrives. You know she said September."

"Well, I'm not very necessary to the preparations. Besides, why don't you come too? Of course it's your holiday as well, if you fancy it. That goes without saying."

"But it's only about seven weeks now until Mother arrives; I've got far too much to do. Where did you think of going?"

"I haven't thought at all. Cornwall, perhaps? It's really your idea, you know; I'm only following it up."

"I hate Cornwall," said Isabella. "What on earth would you do there? If it was me, I'd much rather go abroad."

"Well, that would be simply idiotic, especially with a child. Look what a fool one'd feel if war broke out, and one got caught."

"Darling, there isn't going to be a war. Mother was absolutely positive about it in her last letter. She wouldn't be leaving California for six months if there was the slightest risk."

"She'd know, of course," said Charles, closing his eyes.

"Well, you may sneer, but she has lots of friends in Washington. She gets around."

"I know she does, but I still wouldn't agree with her. I'd rather go to Cornwall, and be wrong."

"Perhaps you're right," said Isabella, pleased that the risk of Charles's going abroad seemed to be eliminated. "I should like it better, of course, because I could always come down and join you for a week if I could possibly manage it."

"Well, do. You can't possibly want seven weeks to get ready for your mother."

"Oh darling, those things always take longer than one thinks, and with weekends here, and the children to get off to school, there won't really be more than a month. I want to get Mother's room done over completely, and I've been down here for weeks. I haven't even started. I ought to have done it before the children came home, but I was busy somehow. And I ought to stay down here for another fortnight at least; it wouldn't be fair to Philip to keep him in town all through August."

"Well, it would be quite simple to put it off till they've gone back; then we could go together."

"But Mother will be here then, you know I can't. Besides, I honestly don't mind a bit, darling. You have your holiday. I'll try and remember the name of that nice hotel that Mother used to go to. You'd be comfortable there, and I could always pop down and see you whenever I felt like it." She glanced at Charles to see how he had received this suggestion, and being reassured by his equable expression, settled down to the pleasant task of making his arrangements.

"What about the gallery? Would Aubrey really be able to manage without you?"

"I should think perfectly. There won't be much doing in August anyhow, and he seems very competent."

"I should think he is! And won't his mother be delighted? It'll be Aubrey's gallery, you'll find, by the time you get back, as well as the most fashionable homosexual rendezvous in London."

"You'd better look in occasionally and frighten them away."

"I frighten them? But they always adore me! And I get on frightfully well with Aubrey's mother, she amuses me to death. She's so obviously delighted that her darling's queer, and will never, never look at another woman. He'll be selling antiques and old lace before you've been away a week, you see if he isn't."

"It'd be unexceptionable lace, anyhow," said Charles, smiling, "and very good antiques. Aubrey's a treasure."

"Bless his heart, so he is," said Isabella indulgently. "I only wish I could have him for the house."

The china clock on the mantelpiece struck eleven, and she gathered her needlework together.

"Well, I'm for bed. You'd better come too, it's black Monday tomorrow, you must start with the lark."

"Presently," said Charles, turning back comfortably to his book. Isabella hesitated.

"Don't be long, darling. You know what an agony it always is getting you off in time. You must be dead."

"M'm," said Charles, and adjusted his spectacles with the air of a man who intends to read till midnight.

When she had gone, and he heard the light creak of the top stair as she passed overhead, he laid aside his book and took off his spectacles, and stared for a long time at the dead fire. The burned letters were curled opaquely black and grey among the ashes: a fragment fell apart with a faint tinkle as he watched it, the curved sides opening like a pod, revealing the dead veining of handwriting on their inner surfaces. He bent slowly forward for the poker and with a gentle hand stirred the frail shapes to powder. Then suddenly, as though the action had been painful, and he longed for the relief of privacy and darkness, he went quietly across to the French windows and out into the garden.

Outside it was very dark, and a soft rain was blowing in from the fields. He went down across the wet grass to the field gate and stood there, possessed at last by the pain which had touched him at the sight of the burning letters, and which by an exhausting effort he had held in check until Isabella was gone. Now he laid his hands on the top of the gate and let it flow through him, experiencing the same sensations of anguish and relief which had been familiar in childhood, when longing to cry over some private rage or grief he had struggled to suppress even the thought of it until he was alone, locked in the top-floor bathroom or out of sight of the house in the heart of the currant bushes. Impossible even to admit such thoughts with Isabella there; the censorship of her presence was too far-reaching; the impression of watchfulness, of ceaseless interpretation, too complete. But here in the dark, alone, the past could be allowed to rise and he could look at it in peace. "Eileen . . . ?" he said aloud, and then waited, breathing deeply, while the sense of pain subsided a little and the thought behind it, obscured by years of self-induced oblivion, became less clouded.

How was it possible not to know what had become of her? How did two people who had passed through such anguish and certainty together continue to live in the same world without being aware of a single circumstance relating to one another? She might have been dead for years and he would never know. It was ten years ago; five years at least since he had told himself with a sort of guilty sadness that he had got over it; he had been even a little proud of having suffered so long. And all the time her life had gone on, as his had, invisible and unknown, accepting its experience from other people, without a sign. Would she have changed so much? She was ten years older, thirty-four: and he was forty. Would there still be that sense of ease and comfort in her presence, that awareness of the satisfying possibilities of life which sprang from her strange vitality? By this time it must have been long turned into unknown channels; she would be married, she would have children with the same dark hair and loose-limbed grace of movement; she would be living somewhere in the country in the gay domestic disorder that she loved, long ago recovered from the blow that he had dealt her, remembering the past only occasionally, without bitterness. That would be best, of

course; that would be the happy ending. She had had a great capacity for happiness, a natural strength for it which was bound to be fulfilled. Otherwise . . . but no, he would not contemplate any other possibility. It would be vanity to suppose that in him she had lost something that could never be replaced; life would have begun to flow again for her, as his had: after a fashion. Yes, but how? It was unnatural and mysterious not to know. It was as if a child, a limb, a part of one's own body had suddenly vanished and had gone on living in some other part of the world, independent and unknown. Some link, some instinct ought to exist, carrying intuitive knowledge: and there was nothing: a gulf of total ignorance had lain between them for ten years, and they would both grow old and die without ever crossing it. How was it possible to disappear so completely? He had never heard of her again. No-one, not even the Pillows, who had known her before he had and had taken an almost proprietary interest in his love affair, had ever mentioned her . . . was it possible that they knew, and had refrained from unexpected delicacy, or for the even simpler reason that he had never asked? Suppose things had not gone well with Eileen, would they have let him know? Suppose she was ill, or poor, or unsuccessful, would the magnitude of the row ten years ago have made them hold their tongues? Or had Eileen vanished from their pre-occupied world as completely as from his own? They had known her only slightly, and her chief interest for them had clearly been the fascinating drama she had produced between himself and Isabella, and which they had enjoyed as privileged spectators, maddeningly detached, giving advice to all, and as eager for fresh instalments of data as armchair detectives. But they probably knew nothing now; it was a long time ago, and Eileen was a person without roots or anchorage, who had only lightly touched their fringes as she drifted.

Out in the field a bird cried suddenly in the darkness, a plaintive, wounded note, melancholy and surprised, and Charles became aware that he was getting wet. The rain had diminished to a clinging mist, moving damply across his face and leaving a heavy moisture on his eyelashes. He must go in. Isabella would be awake, probably reading, and listening for the sound of him on the stairs. He did not want to have to explain damp clothing, or even the

fact that he had been standing brooding in the garden, in the rain and dark; such unnatural behaviour would smell of drama and she would be on it in a flash. The luxury of complete privacy could be enjoyed only for brief moments and with extreme caution. The stream of thought, let loose at last and impossible to stem, must be followed guiltily and in silence at Isabella's side, with the light out and to the reproachful accompaniment of her gentle breathing. Sighing deeply, he went back into the house.

Isabella was not in bed, but sitting in a bright light at her dressing-table, brushing her hair before the mirror. She scarcely glanced up as he came in, and he saw at once that she was genuinely absorbed, studying her face with grave attention as her arm swept rhythmically, drawing the smooth hair up and outward with each stroke of the brush and pausing from time to time to turn her face slightly and examine its pure contours with a critical gaze. She was engaged in a rite, the performance of which never palled and which she never relaxed, and Charles saw with relief that she was not disposed to pay him much attention. "She has the craftsman's respect for her material," he thought, and watched her obliquely as he undressed, touched by an obscure impulse of wondering sympathy.

He yawned audibly as he moved about the room, less because he was really sleepy than to discourage talk. As absorbed in his thoughts as Isabella in her ritual before the mirror, he dreaded the interruption of conversation, and longed only for the privacy of the darkness, with Isabella asleep. Solitude was hard to come by at the cottage, which was too small to allow him a bedroom of his own, and the illusion of it had to be created by stealth, in which there was a strong element of discomfort. The disturbing image of Eileen could not be relinquished now, but it would be too uncomfortable to pursue it with Isabella lying awake beside him, aware from the quality of his breathing that he was not asleep, and likely at any moment to murmur a question. So he undressed slowly, and when he was in bed maintained a pretence of reading for half an hour until Isabella closed her book and switched off her

light, holding his thoughts all the while in suspension, pressing for release.

Open-eyed in the dark, he tried to piece Eileen's face together, and was distressed to find he could not. Something, a quick turn of the head, a tone of her voice in sudden agreement, some fragment of the beautiful and easy movement which distinguished her body, would luminously advance from the darkness and then dissolve, refusing to remain steady. The clearest evocation was not in visual memory at all, but in a strange fugitive echo of physical sensation, as though his limbs remembered her. Perversely, as he watched the darkness, his visual memory reproduced for him the features of Isabella's mother, smiling, vital, handsome, the splendid Lady Oxenwood of ten years ago, who still had leisure to bemuse him with her odd sympathy and had not yet bothered to think about her second marriage. Why *had* she behaved so curiously over Eileen? Her ultimate hostility, the calm practical relentless way she set about breaking up the affair when the crisis showed itself, he could understand: Isabella had crept under her wing, wailing, and Lady Oxenwood, without disturbing herself unduly or even taking the French cigarette out of her mouth, had sailed in and cleared up the situation with the economical efficiency of an old campaigner. Yes, that was all right; she was Isabella's mother; but what accounted for the period *before* that, when she had quite distinctly campaigned on Eileen's behalf, and against her daughter? "Tell me, Charles, is she pooty, this girl of yours? I think you're ve'y attractive, I'm not a bit surprised: vese fings happen. Is Isabella being sensible, or does she want smoooving out. . . ?" And she had actually undertaken to do the smoothing, apparently with a mischievous pleasure in being on the wrong side and taking the unexpected line, and had even succeeded in arguing Isabella into a momentary tolerance: until, of course, Isabella got tired of managing the situation, or began to suspect that she was no longer doing so, and sent up her distress signals; with the result that she and her mother had joined forces, and had finally played the unanswerable trump of Isabella's pregnancy.

What a *fool* he had been, what an unspeakable fool. He had dithered and hesitated, and let Eileen go, preserving instead this hollow façade which had been made to appear so important be-

cause it was labelled "marriage." And what had *happened* to her? What right had he to allow them to dismiss her, to let her go back into that shiftless world in which she had neither anchorage nor security, and where, without money or parents or anything but a little talent and a courageous spirit, she must surely have proved unequal to the battle? He had been caught by his own weakness between two treacheries, and the one he had chosen had perhaps proved the crueller of the two. He had been left with a marriage which he himself despised and with which even Isabella was subtly discontented. And Eileen? If he could only *know*, thought Charles, if he could only see her, as through a window, and be reassured; if he could only be certain that he had not wounded her beyond remedy; if it could be proved that she was still all right, that she had forgotten. . . .

What happens to the people one has loved, and then let go?

At this point his grandmother's legacy crossed his mind, with a feeling of urgency, and he lay very still, considering the possibilities which the thought suggested. This holiday, for instance, that had been discussed: might not a part of it be spent in discovering a clue to Eileen's present existence, and putting his mind at rest? It ought not to be difficult: Geoffrey or Iris Pillow could probably put him on the track, and once he knew where she was he could make discreet enquiries. It wouldn't even be necessary to see her, if all were well; if she were married, or even happy and at peace, she need never know; he would go back to the bed he had made for himself and lie in it resignedly, and in time the longing that had reawakened would grow dull again, as it had done before.

Excited by a sudden resolution, Charles moved his head restlessly on the pillow, and then lay still, listening for any check in Isabella's breathing. She did not stir. Now that he had taken the initial step the details of his plan grew rapidly clear, and he reviewed the different considerations with the mounting exhilaration of a lover who, after a final parting, discovers the perfect reason why *one* more interview is necessary, one last discussion which of course will alter nothing but which is already big with promise, bringing relief to present suffering by putting off the time when the real finality of separation has got to be endured.

"Why aren't you asleep?" said Isabella suddenly in a muffled voice, turning over.

"I don't know. Did I disturb you? I expect I've got a touch of indigestion."

"There's a bottle of bicarbonate tablets on the dressing-table, you'd better take a couple."

"Oh, it's not enough for that. I was nearly asleep when you spoke."

"Sorry," said Isabella, her voice still thick, and fell at once into the gentle rhythm of unconscious breathing.

The curtains stirred gently at the open window, admitting a summer air made cold by rain and sweet with the smell of mown grass lying wet in the garden. Out in the field the plover cried again, surprised and sad, moved by some unimaginable impulse to break the summer silence with complaint. "Tomorrow I shall go and see Geoffrey and Iris," thought Charles, and turned his head, very cautiously this time, so that he could watch for the grey division of the darkness between the curtains.

2. Geoffrey and Iris Pillow lived where they did because it was inexpensive, and because they themselves maintained a fiction that the streets trailing off from the Cromwell Road were the most interesting and almost the most potentially fashionable in London. Walking slowly through South Kensington the following evening Charles smiled to himself to think how completely their system of defences hemmed them in, shielding them from the least breath of a suggestion that anything of theirs was not the best, the cleverest, the most successful imaginable. And in a sense everything they had and did was a success, since it pleased them so enormously. They were a likeable couple and Charles was fond of them, having long ago arrived at the stage where their ceaseless self-inflation was no longer irritating, but productive only of affectionate amusement. They blew themselves up out of a gallant determination never to admit defeat, and since many of their circumstances might to anyone else have seemed depressing, there was something admirable in the childish vigour of their puffing. One was never tempted, after the initial stages of acquaintance, to prick the bubble; or at least, Charles was not, though Isabella still sometimes raged at their complacency. She had been quite unreasonably furious with Iris when, being beautifully dressed herself and moved to an appalled pity by some dreadful new contraption which Iris had on and which had obviously been inherited from a relation, she had said, with the kindest insincerity, "What a pretty frock." And incorrigible Iris had not apologised for it or explained

it, or given the faintest sign of admitting its frightfulness, but had smoothed it over her bony hips with a mannequin's gesture and replied, "You're quite right; it's the *line* that's so wonderful." In the same way their flat was the best and most comfortable in London, and Geoffrey's minor job in educational films the only distinguished work for a man of intellect. Charles was still tickled whenever he thought of their name, or heard it spoken, not so much because of its comic element—underlined by its suitability to the mountainous Geoffrey—as because they were so astonishingly satisfied with it. Long ago, when he had first come to know them well, he had made the mistake of asking why they didn't change it, since Geoffrey Pillow was perhaps not quite the name to carry to the top of one's profession. "On the contrary, it's a great asset," Geoffrey had said, and Iris had chimed in loyally. "Don't you see, he'd be *mad* to change it? It's a name nobody *ever* forgets. He might call himself D'Abernon if he liked, but it wouldn't be at all the same as Geoffrey Pillow." "No, I suppose it wouldn't." "And you see, once a name has got a *hold*," Geoffrey had continued, "it develops a distinction of its own, due to familiarity. Surely you must have noticed cases . . ." and he had launched off into a dissertation on the psychology of names, while Iris nodded at the end of every sentence, and silently formed his last word with her lips whenever he hesitated. Oh, they were wonderfully well matched, they were a pleasure to contemplate. Their compatibility gave them a special position as listeners and receivers of confidences, offering the same terms of analytical attention to all comers whether in weal or woe, since, being perfectly satisfied with themselves in every particular, they rarely had a personal axe to grind on other people's difficulties. The only disadvantage was that they were inclined to be a little *too* interested, to bring up their invisible microscope and scalpels with too detached an enthusiasm, leaving one with the uncomfortable feeling that they were still dissecting away like mad long after one had gone. And there was also the suspicion that they displayed the results of their investigations a shade too freely, not mischievously it was true but in a purely scientific spirit, as if in duty bound to testify to the great truths of psychology.

Still, they were good sorts. One criticised them from outside,

but each time one penetrated to the cosy interior of their padded world, and found them inside it as lively and self-absorbed as a pair of mice, one forgot their eccentricities and basked gratefully in the warmth of an existence in which it was taken for granted that everything was splendid and enviable. Only one doubt disturbed Charles as he turned into their depressing street and began to check off the numbers which were the only means of distinguishing the Pillows' house from any other slice of the monotonous façade—how far would it be possible to question them about Eileen, without arousing their curiosity as to his motives? He could imagine them exchanging a significant glance at the mention of her name, the glance that meant, "As soon as he's gone, this will be *most* interesting to discuss," and he was half afraid that *they* would start questioning *him* if he were not very careful. That, however, was a risk which must be taken: they were unlikely to be seeing Isabella for some time to come, since they were not friends whom she particularly cared to show her mother, and there was no other area in which their innocent indiscretions could do much harm. It would probably be safest to play their own game, and be disarmingly candid—"I long to know what's happened to Eileen after all these years; do you ever see her?" Nothing dilated the Pillows' nostrils so much as obvious reticence.

He found Iris, after he had followed Geoffrey up three flights of stairs on which the Pillows' spoor was deep after the second landing, cooking cheese in a saucepan in the darkest corner of the kitchen.

"I'm making you a *fondue*!" she cried, waving her spoon at him eagerly, "it'll be ready in just a second: it smells *wonderful*."

"Dear Iris," said Charles, putting down his hat and umbrella on the kitchen table, "it smells delicious, but I've had my dinner already."

"I thought you would have," she said, peering anxiously into the saucepan, "but how nice to have something extra, after that walk up from the tube! It does one good to be greedy."

"Iris doesn't make a *fondue* for everybody," said Geoffrey, automatically taking up the patter which was to prove that a dish of cooked cheese (since cheese was what they had cooked) was the happiest possible inspiration for this particular evening.

"Take Charles into the studio," said Iris, "and give him some sherry. Only don't say anything interesting until I come in—I'm *dying* to talk to you."

"Can't I help you, though?" said Charles. "You seem to be doing your cooking in a rather dark corner."

"Well, but *that* has a very good reason," said Iris, lifting a flushed face from the stove and beaming triumphantly at him, "you see, *luckily* the ceiling's very thin, and Geoffrey's study's just overhead, and his desk's in this corner, under the skylight, and the warmth of the stove makes a tremendous difference to him in winter."

"I get such cold feet," said Geoffrey, mooning happily about the kitchen with his hands in his pockets. "It's one of the brain-worker's occupational diseases, I suppose. I find the warm floor quite a stimulus, even in summer. With the skylight open, one's feet are warm, you see, and one's head quite cool. It's a delightful arrangement."

"Go on into the studio and give Charles a drink," said Iris. "I'll bring in the delicatessen in a minute." She lifted her lively gnome's head with its coronet of smooth tight-plaited yellow hair and nodded at him vigorously. Obediently Charles followed Geoffrey's bulk into the next room.

Iris had once thought she was going to be a painter, and though she had not set brush to canvas for years and the theory was generally accepted that a great talent had been devotionally laid down in the service of Geoffrey's genius, she still preserved, from choice, the domestic conventions of the artist, so that she always went everywhere without a hat and was careful to call the living-room the studio. The room had a comfortable bareness which was very pleasant, full of light and air, with a big table in the middle on which there was room for everything, and a well-worn leather sofa and two armchairs circling the open window. Charles sat down with heavy comfort and stared across at the houses on the other side, absorbed in the sudden strangeness of his surroundings. Here I am, in a room in a house in South Kensington, and in a minute I shall be given a plate of cheese. How strange if years ago I could have been shown this moment in a mirror—how would it have been explained? What random cross-threading of circum-

stances could have been deduced to account for my presence here at this particular moment, a middle-aged man sitting by an open window, waiting for a plate of cheese he doesn't want? What's his motive, eh? But of course it's easy; the room is really familiar, they are my friends, Eileen once sat on that sofa, I remember her long neck and small dark head with the short hair curling all over it, the way her eyes followed Geoffrey and Iris that first evening, not quite knowing what to make of us but glad to be with us, not knowing at all that she and I . . . not knowing that I would be here after ten years, almost eleven, searching with guilty hope for a lost thread.

"How's Isabella these days?" said Geoffrey, advancing with glass and bottle, "I haven't seen her for ages. Why didn't you bring her?"

"She's down at the cottage, the children are on holiday. She's very well, I left her there this morning. She'll be coming up soon; her mother's arriving from America."

"The fabulous Lady Oxenwood? Is she still on the earth? I always wanted to put her into a play."

"It'd puzzle you," said Charles. "She doesn't stay still long enough. She's Mrs. Graham Gentry now, you know, very rich and American."

"Who's that?" said Iris, coming in with a tray, "Isabella's mother? What a wonderful face; she'd be superb to paint. Here, eat it with a spoon. I've always felt sorry I never did a portrait of her."

"Thank you. Yes, she always has that effect on people. She's been painted several times, none of them absolutely successful, though. Sickert's was the best; she hated it, it brought out her sinister aspect."

"Oh, but I never thought she *was* sinister," said Iris, her head down, sopping bits of toast at the edge of her plate, "she wanted one to think so, those heavy-lidded eyes, Lilith or something; but I always thought it was more for one's benefit than actual. A kind soul, really."

"I don't know," said Charles. "Yes, she's very kind in a way. Bountiful, rather. She likes being a benefactor. She's terrific if anyone's in trouble, but as soon as one's doing quite nicely she ceases

to be amused. I think what she really thrives on is helpless gratitude."

"Power complex," said Geoffrey, filling his mouth, "my God, yes, I remember how she loved managing . . ." he broke off and exchanged a quick glance with Iris, who frowned at him. (This is the moment, thought Charles. They're going to mention it. No, too soon. It's passing.) "Yes, I remember," said Geoffrey, pushing up his mop of hair with a plump hand, casting about, "I remember she was pretty grandiose in the old days. I remember how she knocked the stuffing out of me one day when she said how much she longed to go to America, but couldn't afford it. Oh well, I said, it's not so expensive, the Cunard line . . . 'But my dear boy,' she said, 'I couldn't *possibly* go *en touriste*!'" Geoffrey laughed, making his stomach shake. "And she didn't mean what you or I might mean, either—tourist class or anything like that. Oh no, she meant one couldn't go in anything so scurvy as a Cunard liner. A private yacht or nothing. Ye Gods! That was the time when she'd been living in Paris."

"She was pulling your leg, I expect."

"Oh no," said Iris, shocked. "She wouldn't do that to Geoffrey. She was perfectly serious."

"Well, she was keeping her end up a good deal in those days," said Charles. "She's much milder since she married a rich man. She's not on the defensive any more, she'd lunch in an A.B.C. as soon as look at you."

"How nice," said Iris. "Money has a sweetening effect on most characters. And I think she always had a bohème streak in her nature, hadn't she, only she was afraid to let it loose before? Didn't she have a terrific love affair with some artist in Paris? Who was it, by the way? She always threw a great deal of veiled meaning into her anecdotes of the Post Impressionists. And she liked *us*, you know; she was crazy about Geoffrey when she met him."

"*Nostalgie de la boue*," said Charles, "if you'll pardon the expression."

"I *won't* pardon it!" said Iris, laughing. "Jealous old suburban smugface. You and Isabella! You make me laugh. Don't tell me she hasn't got a butler yet for the cottage."

"Naturally she has," said Charles, "to say nothing of two footmen and a hallboy."

"And a French maid for Charlie!" shouted Geoffrey, throwing himself backwards with delight. "My God, you are a joy, the two of you."

Charles smiled, impervious to their pinpricks and familiar with the recipe. The argument ran like this: if we, Geoffrey and Iris, live in a so-so flat with a daily for mornings, the reason is not only that we prefer it but that that is the only possible background for the life of the intellect, and anybody aspiring to anything different is a poseur, a piece of sham stuffed pretentiousness and a mockery. Iris supported this thesis with such absolute faith that Charles remembered her once saying, with tears of laughter in her eyes, of some newly-married friend, "My dear, she's engaged a *cook*!"—as who should say, "My dear, she keeps a pair of leopards in gold collars." At the same time there was another side to the medal, kept brightly polished by constant use for fear that one might live in ignorance of it. Iris was a scion not of a noble house but of a solid brick one in Somerset with eleven bedrooms, and she constantly drew one's attention to her background by constantly deriding it. "Those frightful pompous duty visits to Milverton . . . that ghastly house of my uncle's in Hans Place . . . those paralysing bore lunch parties of Mummie's. . . ." It was a logical enough process if you thought of it. What we haven't got we'll decry, but you mustn't think it's sour grapes, oh no, we've had it, much more than you'll ever know, we simply chucked it away. That was what Isabella couldn't stand, fuming about it afterwards as if it mattered, never at peace until she had got in some cool little dig at Iris, which Iris of course would put down to jealousy if she so much as noticed it. Gallant Iris. Spending her life in bolstering up Geoffrey against all comers, bolstering up his comfort, padding his life, no detail too small for her attention. It *was* enviable, the sense of pervading comfort was no illusion; like central heating it filled every compartment of their lives with a blind warmth; perpetual hibernation. The only chill fell on the intruder from outside, when he had expanded gently in the steam heat and had to take himself off with his relaxed pores into the street again. Lucky

Geoffrey: for the whole fourteen years of his married life he had enjoyed all the amenities of the womb.

"What film are you working on now?" said Charles, accepting a finger of toast which Geoffrey amiably held in his direction.

"Oh, a very good one, about birds. It's finished now, they're cutting it. It'll be tradeshown next month: you ought to see it."

"It's *fascinating*," said Iris, "I saw bits of it at the studio last week. The best he's done. Sea birds, gannets, puffins, cormorants—the whole lot of them. Of course I was paying most attention to the commentary, but the photography's lovely, too. You really should see it."

"I should like to. Oddly enough, I saw a very good short film about sea-birds only a month or two ago. I suppose that wasn't one of yours?"

"At the Plaza?" said Geoffrey quickly. "That thing? Good lord, it was absolutely embarrassing. Didn't the commentary make you *sweat*? I can't think why they pay Grogan for that sort of muck. It's that awful jocular touch that gets me down."

"I thought it was rather fun," said Charles. "Was that common of me?"

"You bet your boots it was," said Geoffrey. "It's the joke of the year at the studio, I can tell you. I think Grogan's a bit ashamed of it himself, but his outfit finds it pays, I suppose, with the nine-pennies."

"I can understand *why* he does it," said Iris, "but not why he puts his name on it. If I were Grogan I'd rather gather in the gold in silence and creep away."

Strains of the old tune playing. Why can't they ever, thought Charles, admit that anyone else in the same line has done a good job—perhaps better, from some points of view, than Geoffrey's is likely to be? It was a good film, and to half-brains like me the commentary was *amusing*. But comparison + explanation = self-inflation. I can remember the feeling. I've just grown out of it, they haven't. The compelling inner necessity to find some reason for everyone else's success which somehow invalidates it. One of the defence mechanisms of frustration. When one was eight years old and some other little boy came out top of the class, there was the inner reassuring formula, "Yes, but he's nine and a half."

And for a long time age, even a year or two's difference, went on being the talisman which protected one against the sin of failure. "Yes, but he's twenty-five . . . yes, but he's nearly thirty, he ought to be doing well." And when one was thirty, and that excuse looked silly, there were still others. "Yes, but he's been in the same job ever since Oxford, while I've chopped and changed about. . . . He didn't marry young like me, it's a tie. . . . If it hadn't been for that sinus trouble, set me back years. . . ." Until the day came—when was it? not so long ago after all, perhaps only in the last year—when all the magic formulas lost their power, and one had to measure one's achievements and admit that they were nothing like the original design. By forty one had established a pattern and had better get used to it. From that point, the platitudes of comfort began to open with the preface "After all . . ." After all, I've got a gallery in one of the right streets and it's paid its way quite nicely for some years. I don't make a big income, but after all, Isabella has money, what's the difference, we're very comfortable. Very few men turn out to be geniuses, or creative at all for that matter. I can't complain if I've turned out to be a tradesman, selling other people's talent. My marriage is . . . is . . . well, after all, most people's are much worse.

But are they? Look at Geoffrey and Iris. And Miriam is nobody's child and Philip is his mother's. Oh, stop!

Yet here was Geoffrey, at thirty-eight, surely, or thirty-nine, and Iris too, still saying, "Yes, but of course he's nine and a half. Well, but then Grogan's a Jew. You thought it a good film? When they got the commentary written by a Wardour Street buffoon instead of an ornithologist?" The implication being, of course, that everything of Geoffrey's . . .

That was what made Isabella dislike them when she wasn't with them, and warm to their warmth only in their physical presence. "Did you ever hear anything like the way Iris carried on about Geoffrey's aquarium masterpiece? Anyone'd think it was *Ben Hur* and *The Birth of a Nation* rolled into one. It's simply never entered her head that almost nobody in the world has heard of Master Geoffrey Pillow." "I hope you don't feel it's your Christian duty to enlighten her." "Well, naturally not. The Puffing Pillows, World Famous Self-Illusionists. It's too pitiful, really."

"Where was the film made?" said Charles, pulling himself together. "Not in the studio, I take it?"

"God, no. They did some in St. Kilda, some in the west of Ireland. I went over for a fortnight while they were shooting, scratching up background for the commentary. Amazing, you know, those Cliffs of Clare. You ought to go there some time."

"I've always wanted to. Are they as good as they say?"

"Better. Absolutely beggars description. The ornithologist's paradise. It's almost hopeless trying to photograph them. The camera doesn't absorb the height, somehow. Foreshortens everything. And a nasty job for the cameraman, too, lying about hours and days on birdy ledges and being pulled up and down on a rope." He stuffed his pipe full of a light-coloured tobacco and began to light it, squinting down at the flame which leapt up between sucks at his jutting crag of hair. "Johnny Boyd and I left them at it after a fortnight and went on up the coast for a week, on hired bicycles. Extraordinary, you know; barren as hell. Luckily we didn't get much wind until the last few days. That pretty well finished us." He glanced across at Iris and hesitated, then shook his head at her, laid the spent match carefully on his dirty plate and leaned back with his hands in his pockets, appreciatively puffing. "I must tell you who I ran into there," he said, speaking round the stem of his pipe. "Iris says not to, but as they say in Ireland, what harm?" He took his pipe out of his mouth and looked with benevolent interest at Charles.

"Well, who?" said Charles, with a quick thrill of apprehension. Was it possible they were going to . . .

"I ran into Eileen Oram," said Geoffrey, a glint of curiosity in his eye. "Most extraordinary coincidence. We were coming through some village—I forget the name, place with a harbour—and we stopped outside the post office general shop affair to get a drink, when who should come out of it licking a stamp but our old friend Eileen. Wasn't it amazing? We hadn't set eyes on each other for nine or ten years at least."

Charles made an effort to keep his gaze from wavering, aware that the bright beam of Iris's attention was focussed on him, watching for reaction. She was delighted after all that Geoffrey had

brought it up. Now she could sit back in comfort and watch the litmus paper.

"Good heavens," said Charles, not daring to swallow his saliva. They both looked at him in silence, and he could feel his facial muscles stiffening. Say something.

"How was she?" he said at last, reaching into his pocket for a cigarette and secretly swallowing under cover of this operation.

"She seemed very well. She's got an aunt with her; nice old piece, she gave us tea. All the right things, too; potato cakes and boiled eggs. I think it made quite a red-letter day for auntie."

"Yes," said Charles, being careful not to look at Iris, "I remember she had an aunt somewhere in Ireland. I don't remember that she had any other relations. What did you say the name of the place was?"

Geoffrey clasped his brow and then shook his head. "I'll think of it in a minute," he said. "It's on the tip of my tongue. We went through so many places."

"Well, tell me more," said Charles, making himself turn calmly to meet Iris's eye, since to avoid it any longer would be unnatural. (Go on, be expansive. This is heaven-sent. They'll think it even more significant if I don't ask.)

"There isn't so much to tell," said Geoffrey. "We had tea, you know, and there was a parson there, and they were all frightfully intrigued about the film, of course. We talked about that mostly. And they told us one or two places we ought to see, but we didn't have time. We were pretty well fed up with the bicycles by then. The wind was blowing."

"What's Eileen doing?" said Charles. "Funny thing, I was thinking about her only yesterday and wondering what had happened to her."

"Don't you ever hear from her, then?" said Iris quickly.

"No, we've never communicated."

"She didn't mention you to Geoffrey," said Iris, watching him. Charles could think of no reply to this, and made a slight movement of the head to indicate polite interest.

"Oh well," said Geoffrey kindly, "there wasn't much opportunity. The aunt bobbed out of the post office immediately after,

and we all went back to tea, and then the parson arrived on a motor-cycle. It was all general topics, you know."

"Why should she mention me, anyway?" said Charles defensively, covering his disappointment. "I haven't seen her for ten years, you know. It's a long time."

"Good Lord, yes," said Geoffrey consolingly, "a hell of a lot can happen in ten years. She hadn't changed much, though. That very young look has gone, of course. She's thinner, the features have emerged; she'd be rather wonderful looking if she bothered. She still wears her hair cut short like she used, though, rather curly and untidy. I suppose it was being on holiday, old tweed skirt and jersey sort of thing. It's a windy place anyway."

"I suppose she's married," said Charles, crossing his feet.

"No, she isn't. I asked her. I rather sensed it was a touchy point with the aunt, so I didn't go on with it. Silence at the tea-table, you know, and auntie suddenly circulating the scones."

"I'm surprised," said Charles, carefully keeping expression out of his face. "What else did you find out?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. If I'd realised you didn't know I'd have asked a lot more. I did ask her if she was still on the stage, and she said 'On and off,' rather as if it was a joke. I gather *that* wasn't too popular with the aunt, either. We got a long speech about what a strain it was on the health, and the undesirability of theatrical lodgings, and how thankful she was to have her there for the fine weather."

"I wonder she doesn't give it up," said Iris. "It must be a dreary life if you aren't going to get any further. I wonder why she hasn't made a success of it? She wasn't without talent. She made a charming Viola, Geoffrey, d'you remember? I suppose she just hadn't got enough."

"I always thought she had the wrong temperament for it," said Charles. "You've got to *sell* yourself all the time in the theatrical world, perpetual pushing and shoving, never relax. She was a very unshoving sort of character. I think she found it too difficult."

"A bit lazy, too," said Geoffrey, "or not enough physical stamina perhaps. She had her bursts of energy, but she had a great gift for idleness, I remember."

"I don't think it was that, so much," said Iris, "I used to think

she wasn't very strong. It was rather a shame, really, the kind of life she led, when all her tastes were so domestic. She ought to have married and settled down and had a family." She gazed mildly at Charles as she said this, and he knew that she was aware of his discomfort. He frowned as he knocked the ash from his cigarette.

"Wasn't she living with the aunt, then?" he said, feeling about for clues. "I remember her name now: Miss Bagnold. It all sounds so comfortable."

"It looked comfortable in a way," said Geoffrey, "but I should imagine money was always pretty short. There were some traces of perished grandeur on the sideboard, but the whole place was threadbare, there's no other word for it. Of course a lot of Irish houses are like that, it doesn't necessarily mean anything, but the aunt was quite cheerfully frank about making ends meet, she said they just managed to keep going by living on their produce. There's a bit of farm at the back, and she told me they sold everything out of the garden. She has an old cousin or companion or something living with her, I suspect the two of them work like dogs all the time."

"Then Eileen was only there for a holiday?" said Charles, patiently pursuing.

"Oh yes, I think so. Blackstone!" he exclaimed suddenly; "that's the name of the place. I knew I should think of it."

"I wonder if she's there still," said Charles, making a mental note to identify Blackstone on the map as soon as he got home. This could be done without asking further questions, simply by tracing the coast north and south from the Cliffs of Clare. Point to remember, it had a harbour. He saw himself there with Miriam, innocently leaning over the harbour wall, looking at the nets. Harmless query at the post office: "Could you tell me, please, whereabouts Miss Bagnold's house is?" Eileen coming out of the post office, licking a stamp.

"I don't know at all," said Geoffrey. "We were there, let's see, in May. Two to three months ago. If you wanted to write to her, of course, that'd be the place. It'd be sure to get forwarded."

Iris clasped her hands round her knees with an expression of enthusiasm.

"Oh, will you write to her? What fun! It'd be *fascinating* to find out everything that's happened since we all lost sight of her?"

"No," said Charles, taking fright, "no, I shan't write. I was only vaguely . . ."

"Oh, but do," said Iris, disappointed, "or would Isabella be furious? Surely not, after all these years? You'd probably be bored with each other if you met now. It's sad, I think, the way that always happens."

"Yes," said Charles. "Oh, there'd be no point at all in writing. What on earth would one say? The season's greetings, perhaps, and hope this finds you as well as it leaves me at present."

"I wonder if Isabella *would* mind, though," said Iris, getting terribly interested. "She was so misleading at first, wasn't she? I really think she meant at the beginning to be very sensible about it. I remember her telling me that she saw quite plainly you were tremendously attracted, and she thought it was quite a good thing, you needed shaking up. And then I think she found it wasn't in her temperament, she simply got jealous. She'd never had tolerance forced on her—had she?—as plain women do. Isabella's too good-looking."

"Or Eileen was, perhaps," said Geoffrey, sucking his pipe.

Charles smiled faintly, and hesitated. Should he admit embarrassment, and so force them to abandon the subject, or was it worth facing a Pillow analysis for the sake of any further clues that might be dropped? A voice at the back of his mind spoke jubilantly. Not married.

"I don't know," he said, bracing himself for the plunge. "One can never tell where emotions are going to take one. I really think she didn't mind at first, or at least didn't mean to mind; and then she found she did. It was quite understandable."

"It began to get out of control," said Iris, nodding. "I know exactly how she felt. I often think I shouldn't behave nearly so well over Geoffrey's flirtations if he didn't come home afterwards and tell me all about it. It's cruel of me, isn't it?—but I often think, God, how furious they'd be if they knew some of the little details he tells me. But I suppose you never confided like that in Isabella?"

"I certainly did not."

"No, well, you're so nice to everybody. That's your downfall." Iris looked at him a little wistfully, then shook her head and smiled, as though remembering to treat his weakness with kindly mockery. "I must say I felt rather sorry for you at the time—Isabella on one side and Eileen on the other, and Isabella's mother holding all your coats."

"Good heavens, did it really seem like that?" Charles was put out in spite of himself. Of course, the Pillows must have felt that they were in ringside seats; through all those weeks of agony and indecision they must have enjoyed themselves enormously. He felt suddenly hostile towards Iris, and unreasonably offended. At least she need not have destroyed poor Eileen's dignity. "It wasn't that sort of battle at all, you know. Eileen didn't have her coat held by anyone. She simply put it on and disappeared. I thought you knew that."

"I wasn't sure," said Iris, noting his resentment with interest. "I always wondered. You see, I only heard Isabella's side of it towards the end." She looked at him expectantly, hoping for more.

"What I never could make out," said Geoffrey, taking his pipe out of his mouth with the enquiring air of a detached investigator, "was the role that Isabella's mother played in the drama. She came to see us once, you know, and asked us a lot of questions about Eileen. She seemed on the whole so well disposed towards her, we couldn't make it out."

"And what did you tell her?"

"Oh, I don't remember. I don't suppose there was very much to tell. We none of us knew much about her, did we? She was just a rather attractive girl we'd got to know, I forget how. She never seemed to have any particular background."

"Well, I wouldn't say that." Iris appeared to consider the question impartially. "She gave one the impression of being transplanted, somehow, of being out of her element. Her immediate background, of course, was rehearsals and agents' offices and cheap bed-sitting rooms. But she didn't fit that. One always felt that there was something quite different behind it; not good family, exactly," said Iris, skirting her own preserves, "one wouldn't have said straight off that she was a lady, but one felt there ought to be a country vicarage or something."

"Or Miss Bagnold of Blackstone," said Geoffrey, "as indeed there was."

"Eileen's father was a doctor," said Charles. "I could have told you that much at any time, if I'd known you were at a loss regarding her social status."

"Charles, you're offended! Yes, you are, you've taken genuine suburban offence. Darling Charles, don't be so silly, not with *us*? We adored Eileen, she couldn't have been lovelier. I should have been delighted if you'd made a go of it and run off together."

"What Lady Oxenwood wanted," said Geoffrey, thoughtfully pursuing his own line, "was some kind of heart to heart with Eileen. She never let on what her motive was, exactly, but she wanted us to arrange it."

"And did you?"

"Well, now. We did try; I rang Eileen up, I remember, and tried to persuade her. Lady Oxenwood seemed so well disposed, you know; it couldn't have done any harm, and it might have been helpful."

"Helpful to whom?"

"Well, I don't know. To all of you, perhaps. We never took sides, you know, I think that's such a silly convention. But Eileen wouldn't; she had an irritating way of listening to everything one said and then not answering. At last she said, 'I know you mean it kindly, but it isn't a bit of use,' and rang off. I gave it up after that. I dare say she was scared."

"And she'd every right to be," said Iris. "I shouldn't like Isabella's mother getting to work on me at all, for all she's so charming. And it was pretty hopeless by that time anyway, wasn't it? I mean, Isabella had found out that she'd started the baby. Eileen hadn't a ghost of a chance, really, after that. What intrigued *me* was, how one could be in love with one woman and busily begetting children on another. That must have been very difficult."

"Not at all," said Geoffrey, "if one's in good health and spirits. That's simply sentimental."

"But Charlie *wasn't* in good spirits. He was going round like a death's head all the time, don't you remember?"

There was a pause.

"I'm so sorry," said Charles, "but this conversation is making me

uncomfortable. I was hoping it wouldn't, but it has. Shall we talk about something else?"

"Now that's interesting," said Geoffrey, looking up under his eyebrows. "Are you able to analyse *why* it makes you uncomfortable? After all, it's ten years ago, you can't be involved emotionally. Or are you? Or is it because the subject's been buried for so long that you've got inhibited about it?"

"I dare say," said Charles. "As inhibited as anything."

"Well then, obviously the best thing is to talk about it," said Iris delightedly. "Get it out of your system."

"I'm afraid my inhibitions go too deep for that. I'm a hard case."

"Oh, but it's so fascinating. Don't drop the subject, there's so many things I want to know."

"That's exactly what makes me uncomfortable. The Pillow third degree."

"No, no," said Iris, "that's unkind." But she looked gratified, as though she found the implication somehow flattering. "Tell me just this, did you feel that you'd behaved badly, or that Isabella had, or Eileen? How does it look to you now, when you see it in perspective?"

"I feel that I behaved badly, of course," said Charles. "What else do you expect me to say?"

"No, don't be chivalrous; tell me the truth."

"It is the truth. Now let's talk about something else. Tell me some more about the young man downstairs."

Iris and Geoffrey both gazed at him questioningly for a moment and then good-humoredly gave in.

"He's worse than ever," said Geoffrey. "We had a frightful row with him last week, it was the only thing to do; otherwise we should simply have had to move. He was turning up for every meal and trying to borrow money every time he caught my eye. Poor Iris was nearly distracted; as soon as she cooked anything he seemed to smell it and come upstairs."

"And of course he was so pathetic," said Iris, "that made it so much worse; with his awful little beard and always being out of work and having such a splendid appetite all the time. And as fast as one got sorry for him and began to be kind he did some conceited atrocity or other and made one long to murder him."

Geoffrey gave a grunting laugh.

"Yes, even after the row last week he hung about on the stairs looking hungry, and put what he called his pride in his pocket and touched me for half a crown. I shouldn't have minded that so much, only as soon as I'd gone out he came upstairs with the money and asked Iris to go out with him to the pictures."

"Perhaps he felt that the pictures with Iris would do him more good than anything," said Charles. "Where's your psychology?"

"Oh, I know; but fancy imagining that I'd want to go out with *him*! And on Geoffrey's money, too. I simply can't bear people who are so pleased with themselves."

Walking home slowly through the hollow streets, Charles found resentment still nagging at the edge of his mind, spoiling his discoveries. Eileen had never married. As lately as May she had been in Ireland with her aunt; she had come out of Blackstone post office licking a stamp; Geoffrey had had tea with her. Yes, but how shabby and ignoble the whole thing showed, seen as a series of slides under the Pillows' microscope! A domestic drama, pond life in a drop of water with the Pillows exclaiming and making notes as the bodies swam together, collided, broke apart. Look, how fascinating! Let's see it from a different angle; let's tabulate their movements; let's look over our notes again and check them, now Charles is here.

He wished irritably that they had never known anything about it. The spectator's eye is cruel, he thought, distorting, vulgar: it is so pleased with its own ignorance, it thinks it knows everything; and all the time the bodies in the drop of water, absorbed in their own movements within a crystal world, touch and communicate in private harmony, unconscious of their exposure to the bulging eye at the other end of the microscope.

Come now, he told himself, be fair. Nobody sees your life as you see it yourself. There's always the distortion of ignorance and facile assumptions. Look at Geoffrey and Iris, for instance; would they be pleased with the reflection of themselves, if they could see by a miracle into your mind's eye? Of course the reflection is false;

but you've made it suffice for all practical purposes because you've no choice in the matter; total knowledge of another's mind and experience is always an illusion.

He became depressed. It was morbid and ridiculous to be probing like this into the past. One changed so much in ten years; one wanted different things; one was a different person. Even if Eileen were unmarried, what grounds were there for supposing that she would care to see him? And what did he intend to do? Was he planning a new life, or simply licking an old sore for want of better occupation?

He hooked his umbrella over his arm and put his hands in his pockets, walking with bent head and the idle uncertain gait of a man who is going nowhere in particular. Two voices inside his head began an argument.

"What's the use?" said one; "you're deliberately unsettling yourself to no purpose. You don't seriously suggest that you intend going all the way to the west of Ireland in the hope of seeing Eileen, and perhaps unsettling her as well?"

"Not exactly that, perhaps," said the other voice, cautiously. "But I've been unsettled longer than you think. If I thought that Eileen too . . ."

"Rubbish! You haven't lost a night's sleep over it for years. This is purely the sentimentality of middle-age. Besides, you won't do anything. You never do."

"On the contrary, I may surprise you one of these days. It's true that I haven't lain awake on Eileen's account for a good many years, but the pain has been there all the time, and regret, and dissatisfaction, and in the last twenty-four hours it's all mysteriously got in focus again, so that I see it with unbearable intensity."

"Now please," said the first voice, "let us keep a sense of proportion. You are considering, I take it, trying to alter your whole life because certain painful memories of the past have become suddenly acute. Let us try and be precise. How long did your actual love affair with this young person last?"

"Why, in actual physical time, I suppose, about three months. But it didn't come to an end when I stopped seeing her."

"One moment. You knew her, you say, intimately, about three months. That was how long ago?"

"Ten years."

"Ten years. And during those ten years you have lived a tolerably busy and satisfactory life, I believe, working, eating, amusing yourself at home, seeing other people? You have even spent three years and four months asleep in bed. Now, will you kindly tell me how much of that time has been spent in mourning over Eileen? As much, for instance, as you have spent in working at the gallery? As much as you spent in organising a single exhibition? Or in eating? Or in talking to Aubrey? Come, be frank."

"There's nothing to be gained by that sort of frankness. You can't discuss it in terms of time, or any other statistics. Come to that, the hours of one's life that one spends in love are pitifully few. That doesn't necessarily make them unimportant."

"I could successfully argue that point with you, but I won't. I am simply anxious to understand your real feelings. What about Isabella?"

"You know my feelings about Isabella as well as I do. They're apathetic and confused. I don't think she's happy either. Not fundamentally."

"All right. And what exactly are your feelings with regard to Eileen?"

"Must I say?"

"Yes, please. We want to get this thing clear."

"Well, then, I feel a tremendous longing, coloured by curiosity, regret, frustration, hope—a pressure I can hardly bear. I want to see her again. I haven't any plans. I just want to see her again: I want to know what's happened to her."

"But don't you realise the folly of following your impulses without knowing what you mean to do?"

"I can't know what I mean to do at this stage. Probably nothing drastic. I haven't done anything yet."

"Oh yes, you have. You've deliberately been to the Pillows and picked up a clue. You've fitted the clue into the pattern of a holiday with Miriam, who's simply a stooge in the scheme whatever you may say, and you've practically made up your mind to go to the west of Ireland."

"All right, have it your own way. Suppose I have? There's no

harm in taking a holiday, I hope. It's not even very likely that I shall find her."

"No; but you mean to have a jolly good try, don't you? And damn the consequences. Now what a remarkably immoral proceeding *that* is, to be sure!"

"Oh, shut up. I'm not going to argue the moral issue with you just now. I simply can't fix my attention on it."

"No, you wouldn't. Do it first and find excuses afterwards. I know your style. But have you considered the possibility, my fine friend, that Eileen may not be faintly interested in seeing you? She's had ten years for falling in love with other men, remember. The fact that she isn't married doesn't necessarily mean that she's stayed single for your sake. Those three months with you may have been merely a preliminary to something really important."

"I agree in theory with what you say, but something in me refuses to believe it. My own feeling has returned suddenly with such strength, so positively, that it couldn't be simply reaching out into nothing. It couldn't be functioning in a vacuum, so to speak."

"Good gracious, what a puerile delusion! At that rate, everything in the popular songs must be true. Do you seriously suggest . . ."

"I say, look! Be quiet a minute, there's something about that corner house with the railings . . ."

Charles had crossed a long shadowy South Kensington square, unconsciously skirting the midnight kerbside dustbins, and now found himself approaching a big corner house with iron balconies and railings, blank and silent like all the others yet mysteriously alive. It confronted him with an air of recognition, its grimy façade mutely alert in spite of the blank shutters, giving it the expression of the face of a friend who is shamming sleep.

Good heavens, so that was it . . . that archway spanning the gap between the corner house and the next led down into the mews, the retired cobbled cul-de-sac with garage doors and wooden outside stairways where Eileen had rented a flat for a few weeks in the summer. There it was, quiet and shadowed and familiar after all these years. After carefully avoiding it until he had almost forgotten its position, he had been faithful to his thoughts

by taking the old turnings, and now, stopped short in the very crisis of his perplexity, he was faced by the modest archway through which his passionate younger self had passed long ago to lay its tortuous foundations.

He crossed the road and stood under the archway, looking in. The street lamp outside the arch divided the darkness of the mews with an effect of moonlight, and on the worn cobbles with their shadows hopping behind them a few sparrows were picking at a thin dry pancake of droppings. They flew up at his approach, and disappeared among the obscure drainpipes on the backs of the houses.

Yes, there on the left was the wooden stairway leading up to the green door; a little shabbier than in the past, perhaps, but otherwise unchanged. Somebody lived there still, apparently: there were curtains in the windows. He remembered with a pang how pleased Eileen had been because the windows faced south-east, and got the morning sun. She had wanted to grow thyme and parsley in a window box, so that they could have fresh herbs for omelettes; but of course there had not been time for that; she had the place only for a month while some obliging friend had gone abroad. Wasn't it some girl that she had lived with at one time or another? Susan something. Yes, Susan Croft, who had gone to live in Paris.

He glanced across at the opposite side, searching for another landmark. The bullfinch was no longer there. Its cage had hung on a rail above the opposite staircase, and its tiny body weaving ceaselessly to and fro behind the bars had been the first thing they always saw when Eileen opened the green door at each successive parting. The last time, he remembered, not knowing it was the last, but heavy already with indecision, he had stood for a moment at the top of the stairs and looked at the bullfinch threading patiently back and forth, and thought, "One day I shall step out to the top of these wooden stairs and look down into the yard and at the bullfinch on the opposite wall, and know that I shall never come again." But in the end it had happened quite differently; that moment itself had marked the final occasion, for on the next day or the one after Eileen herself had vanished as silently as the sparrows, and there had been only a charwoman's voice on the telephone, knowing nothing. While everyone else had been arguing with

themselves and with each other, hesitating, demanding, evading—himself most of all—Eileen had had her moment of vision and despair, and with one clean and cruel stroke had cut herself free.

She had hated compromise. At the core of her gentle character there had lain this surprising strength, expressing itself in flight. And at the time, he remembered, the startling completeness of her action had brought a shamed relief. The struggle was over. Left to himself he might have prolonged it indefinitely, and always, given the circumstances as they were—his own frustrating loyalties and desires and Isabella's trump card played in all the strength of wifely pathos—it must have ended in defeat. As it was, Eileen had at least preserved it from shabby dwindling; there had been no compromise and no apologies; the bullfinch had not assisted at any embarrassing farewell.

Perhaps they took it indoors at night, even though it was summer? But no, how stupid; birds didn't live that long. It was ten years ago. But of course they might have bought another.

Sighing, Charles felt in his breast pocket for a cigarette, and turned away. It was curious that the trivial absence of the bird in its cage should have produced a feeling of disappointment. He had seen it so vividly once, and now that he had chanced to walk straight into the remembered setting he would have liked it to be there. Why was it, he wondered, that things seen in a moment of emotion, and particularly of grief, pierced the eye with such disproportionate intensity? It was as though the heart, made more than normally sensitive by the bruise of pain, exposed for the time being a wincing surface to all impressions, however trivial; so that the most everyday sights—a bird in a cage, a spray of sham gardenias in a woman's hat, an ugly man seated alone at a cheap meal—had a temporary power to make the heart contract, as at the touch of a finger. It was strangely akin to the effect of sleeplessness—there was the same morbid sensitivity of vision, the same inner quaking under the lightest touch—and when sleeplessness and heartache came together, echoing each other's drilling on every nerve, the senses became so tremulously acute that it seemed one would hear unspoken thoughts and see through walls. In Charles's mind that state was most sharply associated with early morning, with those hours when the coming of light had seemed to promise

some relief; and he had got up softly, not waking Isabella, and had tried to refresh his body with a walk in the park. It was like stepping into another world—a world which dissolved completely a little later in the morning and became merely Hyde Park stirring diversely with its everyday concerns, but which in those early hours enjoyed a mysterious pre-existence where sound and light and colour were suspended in a rarefied air and nothing had yet descended to common values. A special life went on in the park at that time, a life which died down and disappeared about eight o'clock. Strange characters not seen at any other hour loitered by the Serpentine and sat under the hawthorns, talking to themselves; bands of young men with naked limbs twinkled rhythmically through the trees, their legs going like pistons; rabbits still browsed on the dewy grass behind the railings. Everywhere there was shining emptiness and space; the grass untrodden, the islands of the Serpentine still floating in a wreath of mist, the boats clustered at the landing stage like sleeping minnows. The sparkling air of country summer mornings lay over the fresh oasis like a spell.

Then, about eight o'clock, the light hardened and the first harbingers of the London day arrived, accompanied by the rumbling of buses and changing gears. Clerks on their way to work, walking for their health; women with dogs, grudgingly strolling and smoking a cigarette before breakfast; solitary riders throwing up the raked earth as they cantered; the earliest perambulators. And reluctantly everything changed. Trees, grass, water assumed their mask of daylight and concealed their sympathy; all comprehension of night sorrows was withdrawn. One was left feeling aimless and faintly undignified, like a man who has been out all night, wandering a little in his mind; and there was nothing to do but go home to breakfast with one's face artificially stiffened into the hearty self-satisfied expression of the early riser. "Such a glorious morning. Couldn't resist it. Thought it'd give me an appetite for breakfast." And there was, certainly, a most surprising comfort in the first strong draught of coffee, drunk smoking hot with eyes closed and throat gratefully swallowing, as though all the fevers of the night were being washed away.

What I must do, thought Charles, is get a good night's sleep. In the morning I shall know what I mean to do. At night, alone, every-

thing looms too large: as in a dream, one is hemmed in by obstacles on every side, and at the same time the most preposterous escapes are possible. Perhaps in the morning I shall see at once that I've been dreaming, and be able to forget it.

He stepped off the kerb to cross the road, lengthening his stride to avoid treading on a sodden news bill lying derelict in the gutter. The blatant letters, lying torn and meaningless over a dusty drain, struck an uneasy note at the back of his mind and went on ringing there, ominous, unidentified. What bearing had that dirty paper on the night's theme? It was ugly, like an obscene threat which had been dismissed impatiently in the past, but which now had gathered weight and intended to be heard. The note grew shrill and reluctantly was recognised.

Yes, that was the thought which kept recurring nowadays, rising like a slow bubble to the surface and poisonously breaking across its smooth reflections. It conveyed a threat to which there was no answer, destroying the future and paralysing the mind. If war came, life as one knew it would cease to exist, and something dreary and loathsome would take its place, as yet unimaginable. It would be like a blight falling on growing crops; everything would become sterile; it was impossible to know what unnatural growth would supervene. Only one thing was certain: when the blow fell, one's own life would be submerged in the general disease; there could be no protest or escape; it would be like being born in a cage without a door, or on a planet mathematically certain to collide with another during one's own lifetime. These dwindling months of uneasy peace were like having only a few months left to live.

The two voices began again, wakened abruptly by this new idea.

"What would you do," said one, "if you had only six months to live? Behave like a responsible person, I hope, and get your affairs in order."

"Yes," said the other, "I might. Though perhaps not quite in the way that you imagine."

"There is only one way," said the first. "You would stay where you are, with Isabella and the children. You would do nothing foolish—I hope. It would be no time for melodrama."

"But if there were really six months, there would be time for other things as well. It would be a pity not to enjoy my grand-

mother's legacy. I should like to see the Cliffs of Clare before I die, and perhaps buy a penny stamp in Blackstone post office."

"Good heavens, are you still imagining yourself capable of such a shot in the dark? You lack the gambler's temperament, remember. Besides, there wouldn't be time for dangerous experiments."

"It's precisely because of the shortness of time that this one would have to be made. I should have to know about Eileen. I should have to risk everything."

"In that case," said the first voice sardonically, "you'd better look sharp. You saw that sheet of paper in the gutter. It wasn't there for nothing."

"But we were supposing a perfectly hypothetical case. I don't have to decide anything tonight."

"No? You don't see the parallel? How like you. I might have known you'd take refuge in evasion."

"I'm *not* evading," said the second voice fretfully, growing suddenly fainter, "it's just that I hate making decisions in the middle of the night. Everything looks so much simpler in the morning."

"Does it?"

"Well, yes. After a good night's sleep."

"And what makes you think you're going to get a good night's sleep?"

"Of course I shall. I mean to. I must. Everything depends on it."

The first voice gave an unpleasant laugh as he turned into Montpelier Square.

3. Miriam came up from the edge of the rocks, arms and legs gleaming, hair flapping as she hopped from point to point. She flung herself down on the sandy turf where Charles was lying and twisted her fingers into the dry stalks of withered sea-pinks, crumbling their papery heads.

"Daddy, I've found the most wonderful pool. You *must* come. There's a sort of thing like a short cucumber, I think it's moving, and a lot of things I don't know. *Please* come? And may I have my glasses? I want to have a really good look."

Charles sat up leisurely and took her spectacle case out of his breast pocket.

"Don't drop them in the sea."

"Silly, of course I shan't. I never do."

She flung back her thick curtain of hair with both hands and put on her spectacles, tucking her hair behind her ears with quick fingers. "Have you got anything to tie back my hair with? It gets in the way."

"I don't think I have. We'll buy a ribbon this afternoon."

"All right. Now do come down to the pool; the tide's coming up, there isn't any time to waste."

She hovered impatiently on bare feet while he got up, and then darted ahead across the first platform of smooth rock—dull, because the tide never reached it and plump pincushions of grass and sea-pinks grew in the crevices—then down to more hazardous levels where the less interesting rock-pools lay, stopping every few yards to glance back and indicate with a sort of excited authority

where it was best to jump, and finally down into a labyrinth of moist greenish stone, made treacherous by a slippery skin of fine seaweeds and pitted with dark pools. The sea, dazzlingly aquamarine in clearness and depth, rose and fell smoothly against the last ledge a little below them.

"Here it is," said Miriam, sinking her toes in the green fringe of a wide shallow pool and then squatting on her haunches so that the hem of her short skirt dipped in the water. "Look, come round here, with your back to the sun. It's best to kneel down, I think. The rock's quite dry."

Together they bent over the pool and silently examined the brilliant floor of the forest. It was mysteriously clear and still, a crystal world filled to the brim with delicate colours and strange shapes, with ribbons and threads extending motionlessly towards the surface, and bunches of dark sinister-looking spines and rosettes of fleshy tentacles. A formation of minute transparent wisps darted into the foliage as their shadows fell on the water.

"Look," said Miriam suddenly, "there he is! I couldn't see him at first, he must have moved." She pointed through the shallows to a green knobbed and warty object like a pickled gherkin which was making its way with an infinitesimally slow rolling movement towards the deeper areas.

"Oh yes; we used to get those in Wales when I was a boy. We used to call them sea-cucumbers; I don't know if that's the right name."

"Are they plants or animals?"

"I suppose, an animal. Rather like a snail, perhaps. A plant wouldn't move about."

"Have they got eyes, then?"

"I don't know. Perhaps they find their way about by feel."

Miriam gazed with passion at the sea-cucumber, then pointed to the pink and ivory rosettes clustered under the surface at the edge of the pool.

"Those," she said, "they're sea-anemones, aren't they? Are they really flowers?"

"No, they're animals too. Touch one with your finger and see what it does."

"Won't it hurt it?"

"Not if you're gentle."

Miriam put her forefinger slowly into the water and touched the expanded fringe of the nearest anemone. The petals responded with a sideways movement, bending inquisitively to her finger, which she hurriedly withdrew, turning her face to Charles with an expression of alarm.

"It's all right. It was only hoping you might be something to eat. It waits like that all day on the off-chance of a meal. Touch it again, and don't take your finger away."

Holding her breath, she dipped her dripping finger in the water, and with a tremor of controlled excitement held it still while the tentacles once more explored its tip, and then, apparently dubious, shortened themselves abruptly on the side nearest her and finally withdrew in a contracting bunch into a jelly-like crimson sheath which closed completely. Miriam gave a little gasp of surprise and turned enquiringly to Charles, her lips parted and her eyes full of laughter.

"It decided you weren't edible after all," said Charles. "If you'd been a shrimp, or something even much smaller, it'd have drawn you in and closed up and digested you gratefully."

"Shall I go and get it a crumb out of our lunch?"

"I don't think it would like that either. I'm sure it wouldn't eat bread."

"Really? Not in any circumstances?" said Miriam, using a favourite expression of Isabella's, "not even a cake crumb?"

"I think they only like live things, out of the sea. It's what they're used to."

"But supposing there aren't any in the pool?"

"The next tide's sure to wash some in. They're obviously well fed and flourishing."

Miriam turned her attention to some clusters of dark purplish spines growing stiffly together on the pale rock which formed the floor of the pool.

"What are those? Shall I touch one?"

"Well, I wouldn't. Those are sea-urchins, they're very sharp. They're as sharp as hedgehogs. When I was a boy we used to collect them with a big tablespoon. It's the best way to get them off the rock."

"What did you collect them for?"

"Well, they're rather good to eat, only very difficult to open. You break them open with a knife and a hammer and eat the insides with a teaspoon."

Miriam made a face of shocked disgust.

"While they're still alive, d'you mean?"

"I suppose they die when you open them, like oysters. They're considered a great delicacy in France. I once saw a man near Toulon wading into the sea at low tide and prising them off the rocks with a knife and eating them where he stood, up to his waist in the water."

Miriam sighed, and settled herself more comfortably on the edge of the pool, leaning absordedly over the water with her hair swinging forward on either side of her face. Growing bolder, she put a long arm into the water up to the elbow and touched the dark spines delicately with her fingers. Charles withdrew to a low ledge of rock and sat down in comfort, watching her through half-closed eyes while he filled his pipe. Isabella's wrong about her, he thought. She isn't ugly at all. There's no beauty of face, perhaps, but there's a sort of fineness; those long limbs and neck, for instance, have a certain . . . well, elegance. She could be very chic when she's a woman, if it hasn't been too much dinned into her that she's hopelessly plain. I can see her looking tall and greyhoundishly elegant, in the English way. She's got good eyelashes, and there's really an extraordinary sweetness about her mouth. Of course it's an awful pity about the spectacles. . . . He lit his pipe and threw away the match, his eyes still on Miriam, crouched in her absorbed trance over the wonderful pool. I wonder what life holds for her, what she'll be? It's difficult to see her married; she has the celibate look. And that passionate interest in plants and living creatures; there's a patient attentiveness that goes far beyond the ordinary child's unthinking response to animals. Isabella hasn't managed to transmit her horror of everything inhuman; perhaps Miriam hasn't found the human sort too kind, and is taking refuge in her water world. Perhaps at this very moment that teeming pool is bending the direction of her life? Yes, oddly enough, I can see her remote and happy in some girls' school, tall and fastidious, the science mis-

tress, carrying her pencil and books down a long hygienic school corridor, full of echoing sounds and light. He smiled, watching the bright drops falling from her wrist and hand as she held up a yellow shell and gravely examined it. So what I am seeing is perhaps the childhood of a science mistress, an anthropological glimpse never before consciously recorded?

"When are we going to have lunch?" said Miriam suddenly.

"Soon. It's only just gone twelve."

"I'm awfully hungry. Couldn't we have it early?"

"There's nothing to stop us."

"No," said Miriam appreciatively. "We could have had it at eleven if we'd liked." She got up quickly, tossing back her hair, and dried her hands on her handkerchief. That brown paper parcel lying on the grass with their mackintoshes had evidently been on her mind for some time, and Charles remembered that the picnic lunches of childhood are always eaten early; a constant worry until examined and devoured. It was one of the symptoms of being irrevocably mature that one left a picnic as a matter of course untouched until one o'clock, and entertained no extravagant hopes concerning hotel sandwiches.

Sitting on the grass in bright sunlight they unwrapped their parcel: meat sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs, a bottle of ginger beer, two pieces of currant cake.

"Need I eat the meat?" said Miriam, opening a sandwich with evident disillusion.

"Not if you don't want it."

She laid the limp fragment on the grass and considered it while she bit her bread and butter.

"I could tear it up into little pieces and give it to the sea-anemones."

"You'd probably make them sick. I should leave it for the gulls."

Miriam looked along the rocks towards a whitened promontory where a regiment of black-and-white oyster-catchers stood at attention, all facing the same way, into the light wind.

"They haven't noticed yet that we're having a picnic."

"I don't suppose they know the signs. They're not London birds. I dare say they're perfectly indifferent to mutton sandwiches."

Miriam ate her bread for a while in silence, gazing alternately at the oyster-catchers and at a solitary cormorant which was bobbing about at some distance on the glassy water.

"Tell me again," she said at length, "what Geoffrey Pillow said about the birds on the Cliffs of Clare."

Charles did so, elaborating Geoffrey's scraps of information with an uneasy feeling soon recognised as duplicity. Oh well, Miriam was getting value out of the holiday; Blackstone Bay would remain a shining memory in her mind at least, however it proved itself to him. It was too late for him to try and find innocent interpretations for anything that he saw; even Miriam's hair-ribbon had become the chosen link which would lead him into the shop for casual enquiries.

"In a way," said Miriam tentatively, when he had finished, and not looking at him, "the world is the birds', isn't it? In a way, I mean."

"How do you mean, exactly?"

"Well . . ." Miriam peeled her egg in sudden embarrassment. "I mean, they don't know it isn't, do they? And perhaps it is. I mean, we think of it as ours, building houses and planting gardens and everything; and the birds—except the London ones, of course—don't even notice. They think it's theirs."

"Yes," said Charles, looking at her curiously; "and they're right, of course. It's theirs as much as ours. More so, even. They notice us much less than we notice them. We're only an occasional nuisance to fly away from when we come too close."

"Yes," said Miriam, now meeting his look with quick sympathy, "they wouldn't notice much, would they, if we all disappeared? The world would go on looking the same to them as it always has. Only after a time, perhaps, there'd be more fish. And there wouldn't be those patches of oil."

"Do you find that a pleasant idea," said Charles, "you strange child?"

Miriam immediately looked evasive.

"I don't know," she said indifferently. She pressed her egg-shell into a ball and hid it in a tuft of grass. "Perhaps it's nice to think that nothing we do really bothers them. They've been here longer than we have, haven't they? You said so once." She took a piece of

cake and rolled over on her back, moving her sandy toes on the short grass. "Shall we play the poetry game? We got interrupted yesterday."

"All right. You begin."

"No, you."

"Very well; since you brought up the subject—

'Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down.'

"Oh," said Miriam. "M'm." She rolled over and lay with her face hidden in the grass. Presently she raised her head in triumph.

"Here a little child I stand.
Heaving up my either hand;
Cold as puddocks though they be,
Yet I lift them up to Thee.'

"I don't see the connection."

"Yes, of course, silly. Hungry generations or whatever it was—little children saying grace. She must be hungry."

"Well, it just scrapes through, I think. Um . . . heaving up my either hand.

'But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
The Lady of Shalott?'

"Oh, easy! . . .

' . . . magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faëry lands forlorn'

"They fed her on pancakes,' "

said Charles.

"Of yellow sea-foam' "

"No, wrong!

'They *live* on crisy pancakes
Of yellow *tide*-foam'

You lose a mark. Now you'll have to do the next yourself."

"Don't be so cruel. I'm sure that's the only mention of pancakes in the whole of English poetry."

"Well, you needn't have a word-link; have an idea-link. What about 'Dame, get up and bake your pies?' "

"I can't have that now you've said it. I'll go on from there.

'Sing a song of sixpence,
A pocket full of rye;
Four-and-twenty blackbirds
Baked in a pie.' "

"Ah," said Miriam.

'Hail to thee, blithe spirit,
Bird thou never wert.'

Is there another piece of cake?"

"Afraid not. Haven't they been stingy? Here we are, back at birds again. Wait a minute."

"There's somebody coming," said Miriam in a whisper.

Before Charles could turn his head an old man in a stained white flannel jacket had stepped up from the rocks below and stood over them, holding a dripping sack in both hands.

"A beautiful day, thank God," he said, looking at them keenly and with amusement.

"Yes, isn't it?" said Charles, propping himself on an elbow and smiling foolishly. The old man did not move off, but rested the weight of his sack on the grass and contemplatively chewed his moustache. Oh, God, thought Charles, I wonder what he wants.

"You are tourists, is it?" said the old man loudly, looking from one to the other with delighted curiosity. Now why should one so object to the word tourist? It was obviously what they were.

"Yes," said Charles; and then, as the old man did not relax his ravenous and yet somehow subtly mocking gaze, "what have you got in your sack?"

"I have some moss in it," said the old man, "and two grand lobsters."

"I suppose," said Charles, struck by a strategical idea, "you don't want to sell your lobsters?" Lobsters are a nice present for any-

body, and if Miss Bagnold wasn't at home they could take them back to the hotel and have them cooked.

"I could do," said the old man, "if you're needing lobsters. I do be selling them in Blackstone as a rule." He made no attempt to open his sack, but continued to stare at Charles with what now clearly seemed to be conversational hunger. "Will there be a war?" he said abruptly, shouting as though to convey his question across a great distance.

"Who knows?" said Charles. "I suppose there will be. Do you smoke a pipe?" He held out his tobacco tin and the old man set down his sack and took it, bending his head with a little movement of great courtesy. He opened the tin, shook out some tobacco into his palm, rolled it into a ball and placed it carefully inside his shirt. Then he returned the tin to Charles with another bow.

"They're marching already, away in foreign," he said. "Will the Germans win it?"

"I hope not," said Charles. "What do you want for your lobsters?"

"I'll not name a price," said the old man, looking suddenly hurt; then more brightly, "they do say the Germans can beat the world."

"I hope it won't come to that. What do you usually get for your lobsters?"

"Some are large, and some are small; the price is according. Will the Germans beat the English?"

"They haven't tried yet," said Charles. "But nobody really wins in any war."

"Ah," said the old man, "they'd never win it in this country. It's written in the ancient books." He made a rhetorical sweep with one arm. "Look at all the grand walls in this place: beyond every one of them you'd find a man, with a gun or maybe a stone. It's the lads would ambush them," he concluded with satisfaction.

Charles smiled, and furtively met Miriam's eye. She, too, was beginning to wish that he would go.

"If you sold those lobsters in Blackstone," said Charles, "how much would you get for them?"

"On a good day, maybe three shillings apiece."

"And on a bad day?"

"As low as one and three pence," said the old man with a sharp

look, "and I tell you I had better have put them back in the sea at that price, and let them go their way."

"Let me look at them, and if they're good I'll give you three shillings apiece."

The old man opened the mouth of his sack, rolled back the edge with deliberation and looked cautiously inside. Then he plunged his arm in up to the shoulder and brought out a large live gesticulating dark-blue lobster, which he laid on the sandy grass at Charles's side. It began to draw itself dubiously backwards, sliding on its smooth, curved-under tail.

"What's that it's got in its claw?" said Miriam, now breathless with interest.

"That's a piece of the carageen moss from the foot of the sack. They say it gives great strength, made into a pudding with milk, and cures all the diseases of the world."

"Goodness," said Miriam, looking at the green curled fragment of seaweed in the lobster's claw, "do you eat it yourself?"

"I do not," said the old man contemptuously, fetching up the second lobster; then, seeing her look of disappointment, "thank God I have no need, it's for no other reason."

Charles counted out six shillings and put them in the old man's hand. Then a disagreeable idea presented itself. "How on earth are we going to carry them?" he said. "I'm afraid I'm not brave enough to handle them like you do."

"It's simple," said the old man grandly, picking up the larger lobster and describing a slow circle with it, "grasp the creatures behind the head, in the small of the waist, and they can do you no harm. Will you be eating them tonight?"

"I may be. Or I may be giving them to somebody as a present. All the same I'd rather not carry them in my hand."

"If you boil them tonight," said the old man, "boil them for fifteen minutes only, and they put into the boil alive. Everybody in this country that cooks lobsters has them destroyed with boiling, only myself."

"I've got a car back there on the road," said Charles; "if you wouldn't mind taking them just that distance in your sack, we could put them in the dickey."

"Certainly I will," said the old man, bending his head, and at

once walked off with the lobsters up the sandy slope, as if suddenly too proud to force his company on them for the walk, unless they asked for it.

"Who are you going to give them to?" asked Miriam, as soon as he was gone.

"Perhaps nobody. But someone I used to know years ago has an aunt living somewhere near here. I thought if we ran her to earth this afternoon and gave her some lobsters she might ask us to tea."

"I'm not very tidy for going out to tea. I don't think Mother would like me to go out in this frock, I've got it so wet."

"Oh, it'll be dry by then. Nobody'll notice."

"My hair's such a mess," said Miriam, her nervous, social, unsuccessful self beginning to assert itself. She felt her hair apprehensively with one hand, and took off her spectacles.

"There's a comb in the car," said Charles, picking up the mackintoshes; "you can do yourself up in the driving mirror. Besides, don't forget I'm going to buy you a hair-ribbon in Blackstone."

The gates of Miss Bagnold's drive were broken, and fastened together with rope: foot traffic was clearly expected to pass through a gap in the wall. Charles left the car in the shade of an overhanging tree, and with Miriam carrying the two lobsters slung hammock-fashion in her mackintosh, stepped selfconsciously through the gap almost into the doorway of a lodgekeeper's cottage, in which several small barefooted children took startled refuge at the sight of them. A woman appeared dimly in the inner gloom and called out a greeting to which Charles, losing his presence of mind, replied inarticulately.

"Why did she say 'Good evening,' when it's only half past three?" whispered Miriam when they were out of earshot.

"I don't know. I expect it's the custom of the country."

They advanced up the rutted drive between stretches of rough grass and furze. The house was hidden in trees. Behind their dense wind-stunted mass rose a dazzling mountain range of cloud, solid and unbearably white in the drenching sea-reflected sunlight peculiar to fine days in the west of Ireland. The light everywhere had

a curiously tender, brilliant, watery quality, clothing everything it touched in indescribable sparkling freshness: rainbow light.

"Whose aunt is it we're going to see?" asked Miriam, already uneasy over the social encounter.

"Her name's Miss Bagnold. She's the aunt of somebody I used to know years ago, called Eileen Oram."

"Will she be there? Your friend, I mean."

"I don't suppose so. She doesn't live here; only the aunt."

"Where does she live?" Miriam looked preoccupied; not really interested. She was evidently trying to make conversation in order to gain confidence.

"I don't know where she lives now. I haven't seen her for ten years at least. I don't expect she'll be here."

Charles found it necessary to assure himself of this. The possibility that in a few minutes he might walk into Eileen's presence was too difficult to face. After weeks of mounting anticipation he found himself unprepared. How should he greet her? What could he find to say? It would have been better to write, after all; then at least she would have had the option of escape. But how painful if she should desire to avoid him; if she were here, now, hidden in those approaching trees, he would not give her that opportunity; she must be surprised, confronted; a second flight was a risk he could not take. Suddenly he found that his heart was beating heavily, and he realised that he believed that she was there. Yes, that was it, at last; she would be sitting in the garden, in the shade, and would look up when she heard their feet on the gravel. And then? Well, he would walk across the lawn, perhaps, sheepishly smiling, grotesquely attended by Miriam with her mackintosh of lobsters, pretending at first that the visit was quite unpremeditated and casual.

The drive curved with sudden intention into the trees, and they passed into a tunnel of green shade. At the other end, framed like a sunlit view in the eye of a telescope, was a circular sweep of gravel, a bed of geraniums, hydrangeas blooming in negligent pale masses against the glass porch of the house. As they advanced, a sloping lawn was added, and two gaunt and rusty palm-trees raising their exiled heads high above the shrubbery. There was nobody in the garden. Charles and Miriam, unpleasantly aware of the noise

their feet were making, walked doubtfully up to the porch and looked inside. The door was open, and someone with a high-pitched voice was talking and laughing volubly inside the house. The porch was untidy, strewn with gardening tools, walking sticks and old coats; there was a big wooden box of turf in one corner, and the black fibrous fragments scattered over the floor suggested that this was the common source of supply to all the fires in the house. As Charles hesitated, looking for a bell among the creepers, a door banged, and a little girl with bare legs impeded by black boots much too large for her rushed grinning to the front door, swinging an empty milk-can. Seeing strangers, she stopped, and the smile disappeared from her face with the abruptness of a conjuring trick. She looked stricken, hesitated, then attempted to sidle past them with head hung down, as though, unseen, the terrifying apparition might be rendered harmless.

"Hello," said Charles.

The child stopped, and hung her head still lower, but did not answer.

"D'you know if Miss Bagnold's at home?"

Timidly, making an immense effort, the child raised astonishing blue eyes and nodded miserably in the direction of the garden. "She do be round the back, in the yard," she said, in a breathy whisper.

"I see. And where's the yard?"

The little girl pointed along the side of the house, and immediately Charles's head was turned to follow her direction, slid past him with a gasp, and walked violently off with her milk-can across the gravel, each step betraying a panic desire to break into a run, which only propriety or the nightmare quality of her experience inhibited.

"I suppose we'd better ring the bell," said Charles, and pulled an iron knob which creaked unwillingly but left the silence otherwise unbroken.

"Knock," said Miriam, after a long pause.

They knocked, and after another wait, in which they heard only each other's ominous breathing, went round the house and under an archway into the yard.

As the lawn was trimmed and the geraniums planted before the

house as the accoutrements of gentility, so the yard was frankly relaxed into the comfortable confusion of strenuous daily life. A mountainous stack of turf was piled against the farther wall, with a netted coop of young chickens before it; a mop and bucket and a tussore sunshade were propped beside the scullery door; there was a large zinc-fronted meat-safe, with its door open, standing on a wooden table in the shade of the house, and a wheelbarrow full of steaming white washing in the middle of the yard, evidently waiting to be wheeled off and spread and hung somewhere in the sunshine. The door of a dark outhouse was standing open, and the ring of metal pans on stone and the splashing of water suggested that someone was scrubbing out the dairy. As Charles and Miriam paused, looking about them, a tall woman in crumpled mauve linen came out of the house without seeing them, and with an expression of despair began to jab at the door of the meat-safe with a screw-driver. They knew at once that this must be Miss Bagnold; aunt-hood was written clearly in the tall fleshless figure, the nest-like hair, the vague ruddy benevolent gentlewoman's face; and in something dauntless and spirited in her movements, despite their momentary absurdity, Charles thought he perceived a shadowy suggestion of Eileen's physical grace. Her mother's sister? But there was nothing of Eileen in the red amiable ineffectual countenance which was turned towards them as they advanced apologetically across the yard.

"Er, Miss Bagnold?" said Charles; "I hope you'll forgive us for prowling in on you like this. We couldn't make anybody hear at the front door. I came to see you in passing because I'm a friend of . . ."—he was going to say, "of Eileen's," but something in Miss Bagnold's benevolent distracted gaze uttered innocent warning— ". . . of Geoffrey Pillow's. He came to see you last May, and said he thought I might . . ."

"But my *dear* young man," said Miss Bagnold, casting the screw-driver into the meat-safe and holding out knobbled hands, "what must you think of me? The bell never gets mended, it's a disgrace to the neighbourhood. I'm so ashamed: how *kind* of you to come! Yes indeed, your interesting friend was here with another expert; I hope they're very well, and remember Blackstone? Such well-

informed younger men; it was a red-letter day." She beamed enquiringly at Miriam as she shook hands.

"This is my daughter, Miriam."

Miriam's hands were both occupied with the heavy mackintosh, and she could only nod and smile piteously at Miss Bagnold's welcoming hand.

"We've brought you some lobsters," she said, and blushed.

"Lobsters? No! How can you be so kind? And you've carried them in your mackintosh? It'll be destroyed! Let me lay them in the meat-safe, my darling, and see if it can be saved."

"They're alive," said Miriam, setting down the mackintosh on the stones and gingerly opening it.

"Of course they are, the creatures. Oh, what a splendid size! I'm afraid they were very expensive."

"They were very cheap," said Charles; "we just happened to see them brought up from the sea, and thought they might be useful."

"They were six shillings," said Miriam, beginning to feel more at home, and now deeply impressed by the bold manner in which Miss Bagnold picked up a lobster in either hand and placed them tail-downwards in a bucket.

"Six shillings!" she said, straightening herself, dismay at extravagance and awe before this evidence of wealth contending in her face before they were banished by a kindly recollection of good manners. "Well, it's a very grand gift, and I don't know what I've done to deserve it. Here you come, walking into my kitchen yard, strangers, bearing fine gifts. You won't deny me the pleasure of staying to tea?"

"We should like to," said Charles; and Miriam added, "Aren't you going to put the lobsters in the meat-safe?" She was fascinated and alarmed by the metallic way they were scraping and clawing in the bucket.

"My darling, it's destroyed." Miss Bagnold displayed the wounded door, hanging sideways on torn hinges. "It was broken open by a great dog in the night, who stole a pat of butter without breaking the plate, and four pounds of salt bacon."

"Good heavens, how extraordinary," said Charles; "are you sure it wasn't a human burglar?"

"Ah, no. Look at the teeth marks in the wood. The dogs here are half starving, the creatures, the country people barely feed them." Her blue eyes filled suddenly with tears. "I sometimes think it's wicked to put food outside and lock it up, where they can smell it. God made the poor creatures to be hungry, and He meant them to be fed. Yet we need all the scraps of the house ourselves, for the pig, and the larder inside is never so cool in summer as this side of the yard." She looked crestfallen, confused as though confronted by a frequent and indissoluble moral problem. "I don't know," she said, "I don't know. God gives them wit to steal it when they're hungry."

Miriam had strayed to the other side of the yard and was looking at the chickens. "What tiny ones," she said; "do come and look, Daddy." Miss Bagnold sighed and smiled and went over to the coop.

"They're five days old," she said, "and we've no broody for them. They stay out here in the daytime, while it's warm, and after tea I take them upstairs, to my own bedroom."

"Do you really?" said Miriam ardently, "do you have them in bed?"

"No, my darling. I have them in a warm box on the dressing-table. They wake up earlier than I do, too; they start their cheeping at five o'clock."

Enchanted, Miriam gazed into the shaded dairy, where a young man of great beauty, dark-eyed, delicate-skinned, southern-looking, was leisurely dismantling a separator. He nodded in a reserved but friendly fashion, modestly lowering his eyes again to his work.

"You must come round to the front," said Miss Bagnold anxiously. "I can't have you taken in at the yard door, and you visitors."

She led them round the house and into a dark sitting-room, where the sunlight was greenly filtered through plants and ferns. As they came in, an oldish man sprang up from an armchair with an affronted grunt and disappeared without speaking through an inner door, which he closed sharply behind him. An expression of agony came into Miss Bagnold's face.

"That's Mr. Weston," she whispered to Charles, with an imploring look. "He's a Dublin gentleman, we have him now for a

P.G. He's come to Blackstone because he thinks there's going to be a war. What do you think, now? Surely God doesn't mean us to have that suffering over again?"

"I don't know," said Charles; "I'm afraid it begins to look like it."

"Ah well, we mustn't question His decisions; but I pray every day that our leaders may be better guided. What do you think of De Valera, now? The people in this country are a strange lot. I may seem very Irish to you, Mr. . . . I believe I didn't hear your name? But my heart's in England; we're not like the country people."

"My name's Denham. Charles Denham." He trembled inwardly, waiting for reaction, but Miss Bagnold gazed at him with earnest unquestioning affection swimming in her blue eyes. (Then had Eileen never told her?)

"Now just you make yourselves comfortable, Mr. Denham, while I'll go and tell Miss Florrie, and we'll have some tea. Do you play the piano, my darling? That's a nice instrument there, and a revolving stool. You're very welcome to try it while I go into the kitchen. We depend on ourselves for everything here, you know; I must ask you to excuse me."

She went out, smiling benevolent encouragement, and Miriam reluctantly lifted the lid of the silk-fronted upright. She sat down gingerly on the plush stool, and the bracket candlesticks trembled.

"D'you think she really meant us to play something?"

"Certainly, if you want to."

"I don't want to much. But she might think we didn't like it if we didn't. D'you think the Dublin gentleman will hear me?"

"Perhaps it won't disturb him if you put on the soft pedal."

Obediently, pressing down the pedal and pecking nervously with her head at the beginning of each bar, Miriam plodded softly through "The Farmer's Boy." The Dublin gentleman was seen to walk rapidly past the window with a book under his arm.

"I've driven him away," said Miriam, in an unsurprised voice.

"Never mind. He didn't look particularly agreeable."

Miriam dutifully began on another toneless little piece, and Charles sat still in the greenish gloom, listening for footsteps. It seemed quite clear that Eileen was not to be expected. And who was Miss Florrie? Probably the companion whom Geoffrey had

mentioned in passing; Miss Bagnold had said nothing about her niece. Then there was that strange absence of recognition when he had told her his name; was it possible that Eileen had concealed her hurt, or that Miss Bagnold had forgotten?

Tea, when they were finally shepherded to the dining-room, was elaborate, and Miriam's gaze travelled appreciatively over the table while Miss Bagnold made her introductions to Mr. Weston and Miss Florrie. There were, as on the occasion of Geoffrey's visit, boiled eggs and hot potato cakes, to say nothing of several different sorts of plain cakes and three varieties of jam; it was evidently one of the principal meals of the day. There was a strong smell of dogs in the room, and Miriam was quick to discover two large shabby collies lying packed together on a dilapidated horse-hair sofa. They growled perfunctorily at the strangers, showing the whites of their eyes, but were too idle or too comfortable to raise their heads.

Miss Florrie proved to be a very small person with a timid manner; she seemed alarmed by Charles, and almost scrambled to sit at the far end of the table, beyond Miriam, when Charles and Mr. Weston were ceremonially placed one on either side of Miss Bagnold's silver tray. Mr. Weston, a bald but not unhandsome man with a compact wreath of grey curls round the back of his head, was apparently still unable to conceal his displeasure over the invasion. He made a preliminary round of the table with his plate, collecting what he perhaps feared to lose if he risked the conventional delay, and sat down in silence, occasionally glancing sternly at Charles from under his eyebrows.

"Now tell me," said Miss Bagnold, pouring tea, "how that clever Mr. Pillow is now, and all about him. He is a friend of my niece, you know; they met outside the post office, by a most singular coincidence. Wasn't that strange, now? And after not seeing each other for a great many years."

"Yes, he told me," said Charles, suddenly deciding to take the bull by the horns since they had been so harmlessly presented to him. "I used to know your niece, too, a long time ago. I met her at his house."

"You *did*?" Miss Bagnold put down the teapot and gazed at him with almost tearful delight. "Well, what a pity, now, that she isn't

here at this time! I shall write tomorrow and tell her all about it. She loves to hear every detail of our lives here, Mr. Denham. This is her home, and always will be, more than any other place. My only sorrow is that she's so little in it."

"Yes, what a pity. I should have loved to see her again. Will she be coming back again soon?"

"Well now, I can't tell you. She works very hard, you know; she leads a strenuous life. It's not the life that I would have chosen for her; it's too hard on her health; but she has a brave spirit, and she feels the obligation to be earning something. I often say to her, 'Child, you could be living here at no cost at all, and have all the butter and milk you wanted to make you stout, and the good air of this place for your lungs.' But she never does more than come here for a spell betweenwhiles, for her holidays."

"Her lungs?" said Charles sharply, pausing with his cup almost at his mouth. He caught Mr. Weston's eye, fixed on him with a sort of fascinated distaste, and took a careful sip.

"Well, you know," said Miss Bagnold, confidentially lowering her voice, "she wasn't at all well, four or five years ago. She didn't come here for nearly eighteen months, it was too long away. She wrote and told me that she was run down, and was having a rest, but I've always believed that she never told me the whole of it. She's a secretive child in many ways, you cannot get a thing out of her that she doesn't intend to tell. She came back looking bonny enough, it's true, but her mother always suffered from a weak chest, and Eileen used to get so *tired*, you know, more than was natural. I've always felt that the work she did was too much for her."

"Is she still on the stage? She used to be, I remember, when I knew her."

Miss Bagnold glanced round the table, observed that Miriam and Miss Florrie were absorbed in a conversation about the dogs and that Mr. Weston was moodily ferreting in his boiled egg, and dropped her voice still further.

"Oh, Mr. Denby, if only her friends would persuade her to give it up, and come home! It's not a right life for a girl like her, whatever she may say. Actors and actresses are human creatures like ourselves, I know, but the greater part of them live an empty life

that's no use. There's no religion in a theatrical life, they lose touch with the spirit. Isn't it a great worry to think that my poor Eileen never goes to church but when she's here, and lives among poor ignorant people who make a mock of Christianity?"

Seeing the haze of gentle fanaticism in Miss Bagnold's eyes, Charles tried to think of a suitable reply.

"Perhaps it doesn't matter so much," he said, "the outward forms aren't everything."

"That is very true," said Miss Bagnold, "but if one loves God, one needs and desires the outward forms as well as the inner substance. There's strength and comfort in them, and food for the spirit. We need food to live, but a healthy person also likes to see the table spread, and to come to it punctually. A person who eats only occasionally, in secret, will soon forget to eat at all, and starvation itself is not so dreadful as the death of the spirit. We are kept short enough in this country as it is, with only one service a month in our little church, surrounded as we are on every side by the Roman chapels, and only one young curate officiating over half a dozen parishes; but at least the feast is spread regularly, Mr. Denby; we partake when we can, in thankfulness and comfort. While we give willing service, God will not abandon us."

As she spoke she leaned towards Charles with yearning earnestness, her face flushed, her knobbled hands gripping the edge of the tea-tray in missionary fervour. He saw that he could give her no greater happiness than by assuring her that he went to church regularly every Sunday, and was having Miriam prepared for confirmation. He studied the pattern of his plate in heavy embarrassment.

"Lot of nonsense," said Mr. Weston suddenly, speaking for the first time, "great mistake to believe all the parsons tell you."

Miss Bagnold withdrew her gaze from Charles and gave Mr. Weston a complicated look, in which timidity, loathing, Christian patience and recognition of necessity were momentarily reflected.

"You say that," she said, taking her hands from the tray and hiding them under the table, "only because you love argument, and know well that I'll not fail to oppose you, though I shrink from

doing it. I cannot hear such things said in my house and not persevere in trying to make you understand the truth."

"I understand all right," said Mr. Weston, beginning to smile with the nervous, pleased expression of a boy torturing a bird. "My wife was just the same. It's ladies like you, you know, who're the parsons' meal-ticket."

"I am glad to think it," said Miss Bagnold staunchly, "and little enough are they paid, God bless them, for the great work they do." She gazed fiercely down the table, looking at no-one, bracing herself to meet the next attack. Her face had flushed a deeper red than usual and her Adam's apple quivered.

"They're certainly wretchedly paid," said Charles, hurriedly cutting across Mr. Weston, who with raised eyebrows and supercilious smile was evidently about to deliver some gem of sarcasm; "my father was a clergyman, and he had a dreadful struggle, I know, to get us educated." Miriam broke off her dog-lovers' conversation to give him a mystified stare. He frowned, and hastily helped himself to a piece of cake. (Now what sort of trouble was *that* going to lead him into? Unspeakable idiocy, telling lies of that sort in a situation like this, out of a sudden desire to silence the detestable Weston. Yet nobody but Miriam knew that it wasn't true. Soon it would cease to matter.)

"Was he indeed?" Miss Bagnold turned now to Charles with grateful confidence, as to an ally. "And so, of course, was mine. He was rector of this parish for many years and in better days, when there was a congregation of twenty or more for every service. This house is still called the Rectory, you know, although the incumbent lives in town, now, at a distance. The bishop always stayed in this house for confirmations when I was a girl. We were all born in this house, and I well remember it."

After tea, to the general relief, Mr. Weston went upstairs to his room to lie down, and Miss Florrie led Miriam away to look at the calves while Miss Bagnold took Charles for a tour of the kitchen garden. She walked sometimes beside him and sometimes vaguely ahead, talking all the way, a tall wandering wistaria-coloured figure, pausing from time to time in anecdote and explanation among the vegetable beds. She spoke often of Eileen, in a fond anxious

confidential voice, so that Charles became strangely familiar with this new aspect of her as beloved child of the house, always desired and too little possessed, a fugitive creature leading an unsuitable life, of which whole tracts remained necessarily unknown.

"Where is she now?" said Charles at last, when they turned from a final examination of the asparagus bed and began to move towards the gate. "I should like to see her again."

"Why, she's in London," said Miss Bagnold, looking surprised. "I thought you knew. At least that's where her last letter came from, a short while ago. She may be off on one of her tours by now; she gets little time for writing."

"No," said Charles. "I'm afraid I lost touch with her a good many years ago. It's depressing the way one loses sight of people."

"Ah yes," said Miss Bagnold sadly, "one should make an effort for one's friends. They are one of God's gifts, and there are not too many of them. Are you acquainted with Eileen's friends, Mr. and Mrs. Rovedino, of Chelsea? I asked Mr. Pillow if he knew them, but I believe he did not."

"No, I'm afraid I don't. But I would like you to give me Eileen's address. I should like to see her again when I go back to London, and tell her that I've seen you."

"Ah, I shall do that, never fear, when I write tomorrow. When we go into the house, now, I'll give you the address, and you can write it down. She changes about so, the creature, that I'll not trust my poor memory until I look at her last letter."

At last, thought Charles. She had been in London all the time; I might have passed her in the street. In a few minutes her address will be put into my hand. How soon can I decently return? Will Isabella think it queer? Will it disappoint Miriam?

They passed through the garden gate on to the lawn, and Miriam came skipping towards them, holding something in her hands.

"Look," she said, opening them cautiously a little way, "a duckling! Isn't this a lovely place, Daddy? Miss Florrie's going to show me all the coops."

Miss Florrie followed slowly at a safe distance, and stood a little apart from them on the grass, smiling evasively.

"Yes, it's a lovely place for those with eyes, my darling," said Miss Bagnold, "and you've got those, bless you, and fine spectacles,

too, so that you'll miss nothing." She turned and pointed gaily across the shrubbery, to where a pale line of sea showed beyond the palm-trees. "Do you know what lies over there, my darling, if only you could see it? Straight across the water, with nothing else between itself and us?"

"No, what?" said Miriam, holding the duckling tenderly against her cheek.

"Why, the coast of America," said Miss Bagnold, "the very next parish, where all the lads and girls from this place go to, and who can blame them, for they earn more money over there in a few years than they'd make in a lifetime staying at home in Blackstone and going into decent service."

"My grandmother lives in America," said Miriam. "She used to be called Lady Oxenwood, but now she's Mrs. Gentry. She has a house in California." Politeness done, she looked longingly over her shoulder at Miss Florrie. "We aren't going just yet, are we, Daddy? I've still got to look at the other coops, and the pig."

"Don't be long, then; you mustn't tire Miss Florrie."

Miss Bagnold said nothing, but turned and walked uncertainly towards the house. Charles nodded to Miriam, who skipped away, and then followed Miss Bagnold, feeling in his coat pocket for a scrap of paper and a pencil.

But his companion, when he stepped beside her on to the gravel drive, did not go into the house, but went to a rustic seat among the porch hydrangeas and sat down slowly. He was astonished to see that her face was crimson and convulsed, and that she avoided looking at him.

"Mr. Denby," she said, staring straight ahead as he sat down beside her, "I have had a great shock. I hope that God has allowed me to be mistaken, or if He has not, that He will give me strength to deal with this situation."

"Why, what is it?" said Charles, confidence suddenly draining out of him as he looked at her.

I believe it's dawned on her . . .

"That dear child," said Miss Bagnold, wiping her lips with her handkerchief, "just said that her grandmother's name was Lady Oxenwood." She turned and looked at him imploringly, but with a sort of horror. "What did you say your name was, Mr. . . . ?"

"Denham."

Miss Bagnold gazed at him with embarrassing intensity, searching his features one by one as though hoping yet fearing to find in them the answer to some riddle.

"God forgive me," she said. "I have a weak memory for names. What did you say your Christian name was?"

"Charles."

"I believe it was Charles. I believe it was; if ever that poor child definitely told me."

"I don't think I quite understand," said Charles miserably.

"Indeed, neither do I," said Miss Bagnold with sudden energy. "If you're the man I think you are . . . now . . . how do you have the effrontery to come here parading as a friend? How do you have the cruel wickedness to do it?"

"I came because I wanted to hear news of Eileen," said Charles, and felt a curious relief at having spoken the truth.

"You asked for her address," said Miss Bagnold stonily, "you came here because, after all these years, you are still tracking her down."

"That's an unkind and unfair way of putting it. I simply want to see her, to know if she's happy."

Miss Bagnold made an impatient gesture with the hand holding her handkerchief.

"What is it to you whether she is happy or not? You destroyed her happiness ten years ago."

"I didn't know that I'd done that," said Charles. "I haven't known where she was, or what had become of her. I only know that I certainly destroyed my own."

"If that is true, it's no more than you deserve. I will certainly not give you my niece's address, and I forbid you to communicate with her. I shall write at once and warn her that you have been here. She will know quite well how to keep out of your way, as she has done these ten years past."

Charles made a despairing movement with his hands, then sat forward with his elbows on his knees, clasping his fingers together and staring at the gravel.

"I know so well how you feel," he said, "but I want you, in

kindness and honesty, to try and look at it for a moment from my point of view, and to believe in my sincerity."

Miss Bagnold said nothing, and after a moment he went on, still without looking at her.

"You must believe that I loved your niece very dearly; that I still love her. I don't know what her feelings towards me are now, but she did love me once. We wanted to get married."

"But you were a married man!" said Miss Bagnold, deeply scandalised. "You must have known that what you had in mind would bring nothing but cruelty and wickedness!"

"It wasn't meant to be cruel, and I certainly can't agree that it was wickedness. My marriage was not a success; there was no love left in it, only habit—forgive me, you compel me to speak frankly—and Eileen and I felt all the love for one another that married people ought to feel."

"Then you committed a great sin," said Miss Bagnold, twisting her handkerchief.

"Well, yes, if you like; but please see it for a moment from our point of view. It was trying to substitute something strong, and good, and lasting, for something else which had really ceased to exist. It was trying to make two happy lives out of three wretched ones. That was what led us on into what you would call wickedness."

"Yes, so I would, and what were its results? Not two happy lives at all, but three spoiled and wretched ones, for your own conscience must torment you, and as for your wife, poor woman, I hope God has given her strength to bear it with fortitude. And another thing, Mr. Denham. My niece's life was not wretched until you made it so."

"Listen," said Charles, "you're a kind person, I know; you're capable of seeing this thing with sympathy, and understanding it. Everything you say is true, and at the same time untrue. The important thing is that it all happened, long ago; it can't be undone. But there still exists a chance of happiness, perhaps, and that's why I came to see you. I want you to tell me if Eileen is really happy; how things have gone with her in the last ten years, and how she is now. If she's perfectly happy, if you can give me your sacred

oath that she's happier as she is—all right; I'll go away again and not disturb her. But if I can make amends to her in any way, if I can make her happy because I still love her, I implore you not to let your resentment against me stand in the way."

Miss Bagnold looked at him doubtfully.

"Are you a widower, then?"

"No. The situation is the same as before, only ten years older. Divorce may seem a terrible idea to you, Miss Bagnold, but other people take it as a matter of course. There's no disgrace attached to it."

"The breaking of solemn vows and defiling of a sacrament is far worse than disgraceful," said Miss Bagnold sternly. "Have you discussed this, then, with your wife, and is she agreed to it?"

"There was no point in discussing it," said Charles lamely, "until I'd seen Eileen, and found out what she felt."

"So you came here in secret," said Miss Bagnold, "like a thief in the night; and I in my simple foolishness was going to point you out the way. I think you'd better find that poor child of yours, Mr. Denham, and go, if you'll excuse my saying so."

"Miss Bagnold, you must see that I can't leave it like this. You love Eileen, you can't be indifferent to anything concerning her. If you have any clue to her feelings, I beg you, I implore you . . ."

"Indifferent, is it!" cried Miss Bagnold angrily, "when it was I that she came to in her trouble, poor creature, not saying a word, but *ill* with it—I could see that the first moment I set eyes on her; and kept her here for three blessed months while she never ate a bite or cracked a joke only to please me, as I well know! And you ask me if I'm indifferent to her sufferings, when God knows they're the heaviest cross He's given me to bear since my own mother died. I haven't the patience to talk to you."

She got up abruptly, brushing back the wisps of untidy hair that had strayed across her face. Charles saw with guilt that her cheeks were wet with tears. He stood beside her, miserably dumb.

"And you ask me to help you," said Miss Bagnold, "when it's not many years since that poor child recovered from her broken heart, and I thanking God that at least she was able to go about with a brave face on it, and even forgetting you at the last, as I pray to God she has done! What madness possesses you to think

that I would put her in danger again? No, Mr. Denham, you must go back home where you belong and humbly examine your own conscience."

"I have examined it," said Charles, "and in coming to you I was doing what it told me."

"Nonsense! Your conscience tells you to go home to your wife and child, and make amends *there* for the wicked damage you've done to other people's lives. Why, you haven't even the courage of your own wickedness! Wrong as it would have been, and against God, I could have forgiven you better if you'd done what you said you intended, and not ruined the poor child's life, and your wife's as well, and all to no purpose!"

She moved towards the door of the porch, clutching her handkerchief with the rigidity of a woman who will collapse in tears the moment she is alone. At the door she paused, one hand on the doorpost, and turned her ravaged face to Charles with a look that was not unkind.

"I've not wished to be cruel," she said. "You've had your journey for nothing, and I'm sorry for it. But when I think how near I was to giving you what you came for, and how God put it into that child's mouth to speak Lady Oxenwood's name so that I'd recognise it in the last moment and remember her letter, I see how clearly He meant me to speak to you as I have done, though it isn't my right at all to hurt and punish you."

"What letter?" said Charles, following her to the door and making a last despairing effort to delay her. "What has any of this got to do with Lady Oxenwood?"

"Why, the letter she wrote," said Miss Bagnold, moving her hand from the doorpost for fear that he should touch her, "which came a few days after the child came home, though how she knew where she'd gone to I shall never know. 'Sybil Oxenwood'—such bold writing, and a fine black coronet on the paper! I believe she's a hard woman, for all she wrote so friendly, and spoke for you when you'd never a word to say; but I bless her this day for having a name that stayed in my memory, and saved me from committing a sin in my foolish ignorance."

"She never spoke for me!" said Charles, "what do you mean? What did she say?"

"Ah no, I can't stand and talk to you after all. We burned the letter after; we've no call to be keeping relics of a time like that, Mr. Denham. You must excuse me now. Miss Florrie shall bring your daughter to you when I find her."

She turned away with a stiffly courteous bend of the head and went into the house, leaving Charles standing alone and humiliated on the gravel. He turned abruptly and walked off in the direction in which Miriam had disappeared, intent on finding her and getting her away as unobtrusively as possible.

But what had been the turning-point, how had he so disastrously mismanaged it? No, no, it was not his clumsiness at all; it was Isabella's mother who had been there all the time, an invisible opponent with whom he had failed to reckon. What on earth had she said in that letter, and when had she written it? "God damn and blast her soul to hell," he said aloud, and then raised his arm and beckoned, having caught sight of Miriam.

"We're going now, Miriam; get your mackintosh."

"But I haven't said goodbye to Miss Bagnold, and Miss Florrie's gone to the dairy."

"Never mind, I've said goodbye for you. They're busy now, we can't stay here any longer. Run and get your mackintosh like a good child, and catch me up on the drive."

"But Daddy, I haven't seen the pig yet, and Miss Florrie's going to give us a pat of butter."

"Do as you're told and don't argue," said Charles harshly, turning aside so as not to see the wincing look that before had been evoked only by Isabella. He began to walk slowly away in the direction of the trees.

In a few minutes he heard flying steps behind him, and Miriam, speechless and out of breath, joined him in the shadow. They walked steadily and in silence until they emerged into the bright sunlight, and Miriam gathered courage to glance at his face.

"Have I done anything wrong, Daddy?" she asked humbly.

"No. I'm sorry I spoke so sharply. Something had just upset me a little, but it doesn't matter. We could go and find a new beach now, if you like, and have a bathe."

Miriam looked troubled, and said nothing. Presently, as they

came to the gap in the wall, she felt carefully in the pocket of her mackintosh.

"I did say goodbye to Miss Bagnold after all," she said. "She came out into the yard when I went to get my mac. I thought at first she was crying, but then her eyes are very watery all the time, aren't they?"

"Very," said Charles, opening the door of the car.

"She gave me this," said Miriam, "look, isn't it lovely?"—and held out a long propitiating hand, the palm curved tenderly under a freckled turkey's egg.

4.

Four days later, still sick and hot from a sleepless crossing and a stuffy journey, Charles pushed open the street door of the gallery and stepped into the cool interior with a feeling of relief. It was so quiet, so empty, so well carpeted; a soothing area of deliberate space with nothing in it to distract the timid eye from the well-framed pictures on its neutral walls. Nothing, at least, but the blond head and rose-pink tie of Aubrey, who was unobtrusively occupied at a polished mahogany desk in one corner.

"Oh, hello," said Charles, going over to the desk and putting his hat and umbrella on it. "I got your telegram all right. Thank you for sending it."

Aubrey jumped up with a smile of welcome, his innocent ageing baby's face radiating pleasure and curiosity.

"You got it all right, then? I *am* glad. Have you been travelling all night? You must be exhausted. Shall I send Miss Coe out for some coffee?"

"That wouldn't be a bad idea. Let's go into the office."

His tie fluttering, Aubrey skipped eagerly through the glass door at the back of the gallery and gave shrill instructions and some small change to the typist. When she had gone, he sat on the corner of the crowded table and swung a leg conversationally.

"I hope nothing's wrong? You haven't had much of a holiday."

"Oh, no. At least, I got a bit sick of it and wanted a good excuse for coming back. Saves people's feelings. Your telegram was perfect."

"Well, it wasn't quite invention," said Aubrey modestly. "Brabazon *did* come in, about two days after you went away, and started fussing a bit about a show. But there's no urgency about it; he won't have enough for a one-man show for at least another six months, in my opinion."

"Good," said Charles; "but I'd better see him. Let him know I'm back, will you, and see if he'd like a lunch? Any day this week as far as I'm concerned."

"I thought perhaps the news had got on your nerves," said Aubrey, still swinging his leg, "but then I said to myself, if it's that, why not say so? Everybody's in a blue funk, if you ask me. At least one doesn't have to conceal the condition."

"No, it's not that," said Charles, sighing, "though one can't help being affected by it, I'm afraid. It makes me very jumpy, I hate this total uncertainty about the future. Though there probably isn't as much uncertainty as one hopes. It's bound to happen, now." He sighed again, aimlessly moving the unopened letters on the desk before him, but without seeing them; seeing instead the silent empty little dining-room in the hotel at Letterfrack when he and Miriam came in to supper and found the quiet fishing man and his wife and little boy absent from the next table. "Oh yes, they've gone," the proprietress had said, regretfully but with a certain importance, watching him with the sly pleasure of her type in breaking any news containing a flavour of unpleasantness for the hearer, "he was an English army man, you know. He got a telegram this morning, while you were out, cutting short his leave on account of the foreign situation."

"Well, the Danzig thing isn't very pretty, is it?" said Aubrey after a pause, "and what d'you make of this Russo-German pact? All the rules are being broken, it seems to me; I can't keep up with it." He pulled his tie out and looked at it thoughtfully, curling the ends round his fingers. "I must say the things that are worrying me are a bit nearer home. This national register they're talking about—that means conscription, doesn't it? I wonder how long it'll take them to get into the thirties? You're over forty, aren't you? I wish I were. My God!" he burst out, swinging his leg more violently, "just imagine, at my age, being dragged by the hair of one's head, screaming and kicking, into the army!"

"Well, how old *are* you?" said Charles, stirred by a faint curiosity.

"I'm thirty-five," said Aubrey with a little toss of defiance, and blushed. "Oh, I don't know," he said, looking crestfallen. "So many unspeakably bloody schemes are being started that I dare say conscription's by no means the worst. It's all this evacuation talk that's getting me down. Needless to say, we come just inside a beastly reception area, and I'd rather be *dead* than share the cottage with a slum family. Mother's working herself into a state of breakdown over it. She says she *knows* we shall get seven pregnant women in Hinds's curlers, and probably some blind old men as well with paralytic strokes, all having to be put on bedpans. A repellent person came and counted the rooms the other day, it's *too* absurd, you *know* how tiny the place is, and how unsuitable for that sort of squalid horror. I swear I'd rather burn the place down and get into the army. The Air Force might not be quite so bad, perhaps. They couldn't make me fly, my nerves aren't good enough. No-one's are, I believe, after the age of puberty." He looked at Charles anxiously for a moment, his face fallen into strangely elderly lines, then transformed himself with one of his charming smiles. "Isn't it ridiculous," he said, "how symbolic everything seems at a time like this? Last weekend some preposterous tanks went through the village, covered with hideous men in berets, and Mother and I just came indoors and wouldn't look, as though we were doing a magic. And then the planet Mars coming so close to the earth all of sudden—did you read about it? It might have kept away just this once, don't you think? We shall be getting angels of Mons next, and the moon turned to blood. I've no *patience* with it."

Miss Coe came in with a small tray of coffee and biscuits, which she put down with conscious tact at Charles's elbow, smiling and saying nothing. ("I know you two have secrets," her rimless glasses said, benevolently, "but I shouldn't dream of trying to find out anything I'm not told. Besides, everything comes out sooner or later in the correspondence.") She went and sat down at her desk in the far corner, then spun her chair half-way round with a deprecating smile.

"Shall I be disturbing you, Mr. Denham, if I type?"

"Well, no, I suppose not. But if you could do it equally well in

the back room, perhaps it would be . . . you see, I've got rather a lot of telephoning to do."

"Ah, I thought so," said Miss Coe's spectacles, giving a brief flash; but she bent her head in tactful acquiescence and gathered up her papers and her typewriter. Aubrey continued to sit on the table and swing his leg until she had closed the door; then, having thus established himself as being in a different category from Miss Coe, stood up amiably and put his hands in his pockets.

"D'you want to talk," he said, "or d'you want to be left in peace to look at your letters? I'll be in the shop if you want me."

Charles, stirring his coffee, looked up vaguely, and focussing with an effort on Aubrey's ageless face, the baffling baby face of an elderly midget, blue-eyed, pink-cheeked, smooth, mysteriously not young, but sympathetic and even endearing as Miss Coe's could never be, the face of a human being who has lived through some very minute and detailed experiences and been purged of censoriousness, he felt a sudden impulse to confide in Aubrey, to be guided by his advice. But instead, reminded in the same moment of his own fatigue, he smiled and shook his head and indicated the scattered letters with his free hand. (Never tell anybody anything if you can help it. No, but Aubrey tempts me, he's a well-wisher, he's free from prejudices. But then, what is there to tell him, what advice can I ask? The whole thing's finished. And that ready sympathy of his is also shallow, the surface bloom on his fundamental indifference.)

"I'd better look at these first," he said, "and I've got some telephoning to do. I haven't been home yet. Oh, and by the way, can you give Miss Coe something to do that'll keep her out of here? I've had a very stuffy crossing, I don't feel steady enough for Miss Coe yet."

"Of course, I can," said Aubrey; "it'll be a pleasure, too." He picked up a brimming letter basket and carried it briskly into the back room, shutting the door behind him. Charles drank his coffee and broke a biscuit into small pieces, staring in front of him. The unreal aftermath sensations of sleeplessness were settling softly, imperceptibly thickening the inner atmosphere of defeat. Well, it's over, he thought. Another crowning triumph for indecisiveness. And what is this treacherous feeling of relief, that nothing's

changed? Once more the ritual of escape has been performed in perfect safety, dangerous desires have been appeased by gestures of preparation, by crossing the sea, by visiting Miss Bagnold and undergoing the safe punishment of disappointment. Soon I shall conclude the ceremony by ringing up Isabella, and presently I shall go home as though nothing had happened. . . .

He sat staring at the opposite wall, hating himself, and from time to time mechanically ate another biscuit.

One of those inexplicable changes had taken place on the journey home, a recoil of the emotions such as he had experienced before and had learned secretly to dread. Why had failure, of any sort, this undermining power? Other characters, even Aubrey, pursued their lives with some tenacity of purpose, they were not under this compulsion to shrink back and change their course at each rebuff. Was it will-power that he lacked, was that the missing plate in the armour which allowed the old paralysing indecisiveness to seep in hour by hour until the limbs were heavy with its weight, and all purpose and even desire itself was quenched? No, no; it was something much less easily explained than that; there was no such thing as will, there was only the uneasy mirror of the mind, reflecting ceaseless changes like the surface of a bubble. First one colour was there, and then another; it was insensitive to any rational control. Sometimes it cleared, and a simple course of action became suddenly perceptible, as when he had gone to Ireland; it had remained painfully sharp even after the defeat at Blackstone, so that he had known, never more clearly, that what he meant to do was to go straight back to London and look for Eileen; and then, on the journey home, unaccountably, it had clouded over, so that there was no telling at what precise point the rot had set in, leaving the way open once more for the disease of doubt, of inaction, and finally of guilty relief that he had been unsuccessful. Perhaps, yes, it was just possible that the first crack had appeared at the moment when he and Miriam had gone into the dining-room, and the voice of the proprietress had broken in on them with ominous importance, explaining the absence of the quiet family from the next table. At that moment, fears and possibilities which personal pre-occupations had kept at bay had suddenly asserted themselves, saying, "Look; it is all to no purpose; we are one too many for

you." And after that the sinister refrain, uttered so quietly at first as to pass unnoticed, scarcely able to distract his thoughts for more than a moment from what had happened during the afternoon, had been repeated at steadily shrinking intervals and with gathering strength, in snatches of conversation heard on the train, in the newspaper casually picked up in the Dublin hotel, in the ominous growl of talk from the next cabin, and finally in Aubrey's outburst of apprehension before he had been five minutes in the gallery; until now it had reached the deafening proportions of full orchestra, first mocking and then hideously drowning the faint air which had begun to sing with such ravishing promise to his heart's ear during that night—how long ago it seemed, how forlorn and doomed, now, to disappointment—when he had stirred the soft ash of Eileen's letters. There was going to be a war. Of course. Such preparations, such an atmosphere of dread did not come into being and reach this reverberating pitch simply to die away again, without a climax. It was like being in the path of an avalanche which was moving distantly downhill: for a time it moved so slowly and was so far off that one took it for granted, or at least hoped, that something would arrest it; but now it was travelling with such speed and noise and spreading such effortless destruction that one could only stare with fascinated certainty, knowing at last that the moment of escape was gone. But had there ever been a moment of escape? Hadn't the search for Eileen been all along a futile gesture, an attempt to shut out the future with a screen of personal problems and solutions which was bound to go down like a wall of cards before the inevitable catastrophe?

Charles ate the last of the biscuits, sighing heavily, and made a feint of opening several letters with a paper-knife. He could hear Aubrey's voice in the back room, dictating something or other on an irritating note, and the muffled resentful tap and pause of Miss Coe's typewriter. He put the letters down again and lit a cigarette, glancing across with a look of doubt and distaste at the telephone. As soon as he had finished his cigarette he would ring up Isabella. It would be a mistake to put it off until she rang up first. Attack the best defence; yes, ring up Isabella. He yawned enormously and closed his eyes, sinking back into lethargy.

Again, for the hundredth time, Miss Bagnold's face, tear-stained,

indignant, defensive, rose up sorrowfully on the darkness inside his eyelids, and his spirits guiltily sank under her accusations. She no longer seemed blind and prejudiced, but far-sighted, morally justified, *right*. Yes, what had he been doing there? The seeming logic of his attempt had been exposed under her watery gaze for what it was—a furtive disloyalty and self-deception. Miss Bagnold's views were not his; he could still disagree with her every argument; yet her admonishment had fallen with all the condemning weight of some old punishment of childhood, leaving him crushed under the sense of guilt. During the sleepless night of the journey all the force of his reason had been powerless to keep out the sordid vision of himself as Miss Bagnold saw him, the middle-aged seducer betraying home and trust and making an ignoble attempt to repeat his crime. And the strange thing was, that though reason could reject this impression with impatience as the effect of sleeplessness and discouragement, the image of Eileen, too, wore a different guise; her imagined face had lost its look of wistful enquiry and was averted, hostile. He could imagine her only listening to Miss Bagnold or reading her letter, frowning over the close pages with severity and displeasure, hating him for this cruel and futile reminder of the pain he had given her in the past.

He made an effort to shake off the heavy weight of humiliation, and found himself turning back with a relief which was almost eagerness to the prospect he had tried to escape. Isabella was not hostile; not fundamentally; her very watchfulness sprang only from her fear of losing him and her determination to keep at bay all destructive influences. As Eileen turned away her face, so Isabella now seemed to beckon and forgive; her face was welcoming and free of reproach, since she knew nothing; she would be eager to draw him back into the familiar sphere; the walls would close around him comfortably once more and he would cease to struggle.

The telephone rang suddenly at his elbow and his heart leaped. He leaned forward and laid his hand on the receiver, but did not lift it. The ringing stopped, and Miss Coe's typewriter in the next room clattered to a standstill. He heard Aubrey's shrill and aggressive telephone voice soften almost at once to an affectionately social tone. In a moment the door opened.

"Your wife's on the telephone," said Aubrey, his casual expression somehow conveying the fact that he knew that something was going on which must not be noticed. He withdrew his head and closed the door briskly, and immediately raised his voice again in dictation. Charles picked up the receiver.

"Charles, is that you? I've been waiting for you to telephone. Miriam's been home for nearly an hour. I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you?"

"I was just on the point of ringing you," said Charles, "but I got side-tracked for the moment. Well, how are you? All right? Did you get my wire? I told Miriam to explain that I'd had to look in at the gallery."

"Yes, what on earth's the matter? Is it on fire?"

"Only metaphorically. No, it was only something Aubrey couldn't handle by himself, so he wired me to know if I could come home for a day or two."

"Good heavens, why didn't he get in touch with *me*? How on earth did he know where you were?"

"I'd just written to him, as it happened, and was still in the same place. It wasn't anything you could have dealt with, really. I'll tell you all about it when I get home."

"You never wrote to *me*," said Isabella plaintively.

"No, well, I've hardly been away, have I? I was going to, but then when I got Aubrey's wire and decided to come straight back there really wasn't time. I've been travelling all night."

"Well, darling, I can't scold you because it's all so opportune. If I'd known where you were I'd have wired you myself three days ago, I'd no idea Aubrey was being favoured with your changes of address. But never mind—I've got a wonderful surprise for you. Who d'you think's here?"

"I don't know; who?"

"Guess."

"I'm afraid I can't think of anybody."

"Oh darling, you *do* sound dull. Come home and see. I'm tired of waiting for you. I'm just going to mix a most delicious drink, so you'd better hurry."

"All right, I'll be home in half an hour," said Charles, his heart

sinking, and put back the receiver with a feeling of dissatisfaction. He had not said the right things after all; he ought to have sounded busy and important, a man recalled to London on pressing affairs; and instead he had been dull and even evasive, he had committed the old error of falling back defensively before Isabella's questions. And who on earth would be waiting for him in the house, dreadfully bright and wide awake and drinking Isabella's cocktails? He could think of nobody; certainly no-one who could be classed as a pleasant surprise. But perhaps there was a certain good in it, in spite of the annoyance; where there was so much to be concealed it would be easier to get through the first moments with Isabella in the presence of a third person. By the time that he was left alone with her, the story about Brabazon and the gallery would have had a chance to harden.

He banged the drawers of his desk and pushed back his chair, making noises of departure, and Aubrey, hearing the signal, emerged at once from the back room, shutting the door behind him, and stood looking at Charles sympathetically with his head on one side. Beyond the closed door Miss Coe's typewriter fell ominously silent, and without a word the two men went into the gallery and walked slowly together over the thick carpet. Aubrey's head was bent to receive a confidence; he did not look at Charles.

"Look here," said Charles, with embarrassment, "about this Brabazon business. Does Miss Coe know about it?"

"She knows I sent you a telegram to come home," said Aubrey, "but she doesn't know why. I think it's killing her."

"Well, could you manage to let her know about it, in passing? Just enough, I mean, so that if Isabella should ring up or come into the gallery . . . I can just imagine Miss Coe saying 'I don't know why he came back, Mrs. Denham, I haven't seen anything to justify it.' You know, it would look so odd."

"I know," said Aubrey comfortingly. "I'll give her just enough to chew on and no more." They came to a standstill by the desk and Aubrey fluttered the pages of a catalogue. "I suppose," he said, "you're not in any difficulty that I could help about? I don't wish to be inquisitive."

Charles hesitated for a moment, then smiled and shook his head. "I don't know if I'm in a difficulty or not," he said. "I think I've

been doing my best to get into one, but I'm hoping I haven't succeeded. I'm very grateful for the telegram."

"I know," said Aubrey again, serious and appreciative, and nodded as though the problem had been fully dealt with. It was nice that there were no sly smiles, no confidential matey nudgings about Aubrey. One of the subtle advantages of his queerness?

On the way home Charles carefully rehearsed his memories of the Irish holiday, blotting out all reference to Miss Bagnold. Miriam had been warned. "I don't think we'll say anything, shall we, about the visit to Miss Bagnold's? I don't suppose your mother would have liked it." And Miriam, strange reliable child, bred to an unhappy secretiveness, of which one was now so shamefully taking advantage, had asked no questions and could almost certainly be depended on to say nothing. Unless, of course, Isabella chose to question her, as she inevitably would? But Miriam had learned, too, the arts of evasion; she had already formed her shell against Isabella. Then there was Aubrey's telegram, and the importance of being on the spot to negotiate with Brabazon. . . . "He's a difficult person to handle, but he's worth having. He'll be worth all the trouble, some day. . . ." Yes, that was the line to take, it sounded reasonable. And Isabella didn't believe in Brabazon as a painter, and could be argued with in safety.

Charles let himself in at the front door and laid his hat and umbrella on the hall table. The cool dim orderly atmosphere checked and admonished him. Upstairs in the drawing-room Isabella would be tasting her cocktail and talking, posed at ease in her landscape of cushions and flowers, serene centre of a conversation piece into which he must now penetrate, unwashed, unfresh, heavy with fatigue and surreptitious anxiety. He went upstairs quietly, listening for her voice, and at the landing caught his foot on the last stair and stumbled. There was a rustle of movement in the drawing-room and the door was snatched hastily open by Isabella, who was looking startled.

"Darling!" she said, and then again, with unnatural emphasis, "darling, I thought you were never coming."

"I came as quickly as I could," said Charles, kissing her apologetically. Her cheek was cool and smooth and unresponsive, and her smile had a nervous reference in it.

"Who is it?" he whispered, aware at once of a slight uncertainty in her bearing. Her warmth of tone was for the benefit of somebody inside the room.

"Come and see," said Isabella, taking his hand with the anxiety of a child who has rehearsed a certain effect and is determined to create it. Whoever it is, thought Charles, she's glad of my support. It's somebody she hasn't got control of. He followed her into the room and saw, sitting idly on the hearthrug with her back against an armchair and surrounded by scattered letters and writing materials, Isabella's mother.

"Sybil! Good God! I hadn't the faintest idea that you were here."

Sybil Gentry threw back her head and looked at him intently, then threw away her cigarette and held out both hands, screwing up her eyes in an ecstatic yet somehow mocking smile which welcomed and laughed at him intimately with teeth and eyelashes.

"Of course you hadn't," she said, drawing him down and kissing him on both cheeks. "How could you know, when we didn't know where to find you? I began to fink Isabella was concealing ve fact vat you'd gone off for good." She continued to hold him by both hands, scanning his face affectionately, then loosed his fingers abruptly and sank back against her chair, groping about on the rug for her cigarettes but still keeping her eyes on Charles. "Give ve man a drink, Isabella," she said, "I fear, I fear it's been a shock."

"It certainly has," said Charles, sitting down on the sofa and smiling back at her. "We didn't think you'd be here for at least a month. How wonderful to have you here so early, though. How did you manage it?"

"Mother flew over in the Clipper," said Isabella importantly, handing Charles a cocktail with a slight frown; "she wants us to go back with her to California. I want to talk to you about it."

"Good heavens."

"Don't worry him yet," said Sybil, sticking a cigarette in her mouth with a vigorous straight-fingered gesture, "let ve poor man drink his drink and let me look at him." She lit her cigarette and left it in her mouth, tilting back her head to avoid the smoke. "You're still looking ve'y handsome, Charles."

"I never was that, Sybil, and you take the words out of my mouth. How wonderful *you're* looking, is what I was going to say. Even younger and handsomer than before you went to California."

"No, vat's cruel," said Sybil, "because it can't be true. I'm an old woman, Charles; what you see is only ve result of anxious art; I've got myself up specially for your sake." She made a little displaying gesture with one hand, lightly indicating her hair, her face, her long limbs so casually disposed on the rug before him; then let her hand fall with mock resignation in her lap. Charles sat smilingly confronting her, his glass in his hand, making no effort to release himself from the warm amused possession of her gaze. He was aware of Isabella somewhere to the right, sitting mute and observant on the arm of her chair, tinkling fragments of ice against her glass but not daring to interrupt. It was extraordinary how quickly and completely she abdicated when her mother was present, maintaining, instead of her usual cool dominance of the domestic scene, an anxious and slightly irritated deference which at every turn betrayed a desire to compete. She's afraid of her mother, thought Charles, and with good reason. She would love to possess, herself, that subtly sinister blend of intimacy and authority. With Isabella it's the intimacy that's lacking; it's that that makes Sybil so fascinating and at the same time so dangerous. How old is she, I wonder? Sixty? Age will defeat Isabella but never this one.

He looked at Sybil, still smiling, and secretly marvelled. The marks of age were there in her face, there was no great effort to conceal them; her beautiful soft hair was grey, the contours of her face had softened and fallen from their youthful firmness, and there was a cobweb of mobile wrinkles round eyes and mouth. Yet she was still beautiful; one's eye still traced with appreciation the fine squarish structure of facial bone; it was not a beauty that had ever depended on the flesh, and in the heavy-lidded eyes there was no apparent consciousness of decay, none of the painfully learned diffidence so often seen in the eyes of once handsome women who have learned at last that they can never again appear desirable or young. No; Sybil's eyes, half-closed as he always remembered them behind a thread of smoke, were as ironically intimate and compelling as ever in the past, and her air of inner amusement preserved her from absurdity. It is absurd, she seemed to say, that you,

at your age, are still susceptible to me, at mine; but you are, you are; and we are both aware of it. Charles dropped his eyes to the letters strewn around her.

"You're as great a letter-writer as ever, I see," he said, and immediately regretted having said it. Would she sense that his thoughts had immediately flown to Miss Bagnold?

"She never stops," said Isabella, fretfully admiring. "She wrote between thirty and forty letters yesterday. I don't know how she does it."

"I don't know how you uvvers manage to avoid it," said Sybil. "People are always writing, and vey like to be answered. Besides, it isn't every day vat one crosses ve Atlantic in a Clipper; people might never know if I didn't write and tell vem about it."

"I think you're amazing," said Charles, glad to get away from the subject of letters. "I wouldn't do it for a thousand pounds. Not for ten thousand."

"Mother wants us to go back that way," said Isabella, giving him the particular confident smile which was usually the preliminary to persuasion. "She says it's wonderfully comfortable and not a bit frightening. It would be a marvellous experience for the children; there were some American children on board when she came over, she says they took it all for granted."

"What is this, though?" said Charles. "I didn't know you were planning to go to America?"

"It's all of us," said Isabella, glancing appealingly at her mother. "Mother thinks we ought to go over at once, before war breaks out. That's why I was so anxious to get hold of you. I wanted to discuss it."

"But I thought you'd arranged that there wasn't going to be a war," said Charles, smiling maliciously at Sybil.

"So I had, but—if you can imagine such an unlikely fmg—I'm afraid I'm wrong. Vey're saying in Washington now vat it's inevitable; but America won't be in it, whatever happens. You'd better all come back wiv me and turn into Americans."

"What a nice idea," said Charles; "I've always wanted to play golf in white linen knickerbockers."

"Well, you could, at once," said Sybil. "Vere's a golf course close to ve house. You needn't lose a minute."

"No, but seriously, darling," said Isabella, frowning, "isn't it worth considering? When it comes, it'll come suddenly, and then one mightn't be able to get away. The first thing we'll know about it'll be thousands of giant bombing planes over London. They won't give us any warning."

"Yes, but my dear girl, even if they don't, I can't just leave London and go for an indefinite holiday in America. I'm not a millionaire, you must remember."

"But Graham is," said Sybil, "vat's one of ve fings vat's so nice about him. And you could subsist entirely on oranges out of ve garden."

"But I don't even like oranges very much. Besides, what would Graham say? Even a millionaire mightn't want to support his wife's daughter and son-in-law and two grandchildren indefinitely."

"Oh, he never notices anyfing," said Sybil. "He's been converted to psycho-analysis; it's made a new man of him, he'd be only too happy to have you all as case-histories. He finds me too hard a nut to crack, he always says he'd get better results wiv children. No, but really, Charles, you've no idea what psycho-analysis has done for him; it's been so stimulating, at his age, to discover vat everyfing's quite different from what he'd always fought, and vat he's really a primitive savage living in ve jungle."

"I should think it's fascinating," said Charles, "but it still doesn't make me want to go and live with him."

"Oh, but it needn't make any difference to *you*, Charles. All you need do is let him ask you questions occasionally, and perhaps, if you felt ve'y generous, give him some little titbit about wanting to get into your muvver's bed when you were a little boy, and he'll be as happy as ve day is long. It's no trouble, really."

"I do wish you'd be serious," said Isabella, filling up Charles's glass.

"All right, make a serious suggestion."

"But darling, it *is* serious. It's so serious that Mother's come all the way from California to take us back with her. You really needn't talk as though we were in the workhouse. Aubrey could look after the gallery for you perfectly well, and if it comes to that, we shouldn't starve without it. You needn't be proud."

"I've no objection to living on your money," said Charles, "or

Graham's, or anybody else's. But I do happen to like the gallery, and care what becomes of it. Once it's started the war might quite easily last for years, and one might not be able to get back. I don't in the least mind your taking the children over, since Sybil's so kind as to suggest it, at least until we see what's going to happen. But I really can't throw up everything here at a moment's notice. It's out of the question."

"But you've just said," pursued Isabella irritably, "that one might not be able to get back. If I went without you we might be separated for years."

Warily, Charles avoided Sybil's eye, but he could not miss the significance with which she threw back her head and thoughtfully blew a thin jet of smoke at the ceiling. Damn her, he thought; she knows that I've suddenly seen it as a solution.

"One has to consider that possibility," he said, "before one starts jumping about from continent to continent."

"It's the children I'm thinking of," said Isabella. "Supposing anything happened to them, would you be able to forgive yourself? And even supposing that there aren't terrific air raids—which there will be—there might be years of nerve-strain and starvation. Look at all the German and Austrian children who had rickets after the last war. Your gallery wouldn't seem so important if Philip had been killed or made a nervous wreck for life. You'd have a different sense of proportion."

"I'm not arguing about that," said Charles. "I even think it would be a good idea if you took the children over. Regard it as a three months' holiday, if you like, and if things look like settling themselves at the end of that time, or even six months, bring them back again. I'm only saying that I can't be included in the party. I shall be quite all right, you know. I shan't get rickets."

"There," said Isabella to her mother, "you see how obstinate he is. I told you what it would be like. He hasn't got any real reason."

"But he has, child. He says he can't leave the gallery."

"He was prepared to leave it for a solid month just to go to Ireland with Miriam."

"Ireland's easier to come back from than America," said Charles,

"as I've just demonstrated. And I wish you wouldn't discuss me as if I weren't here."

"Quite right," said Sybil, nodding. "How female of us! Let's discuss Isabella as if *she* weren't here, instead. D'you fink she's afraid to leave you alone in London?"

"I don't see why," said Charles. "When one's past forty one can be left with impunity anywhere."

"Oh, from *vat* point of view . . ." said Sybil, laughing, "I hadn't fought of vat. Of course I was only finking of air raids and fings."

"I'm afraid I flattered myself, then," said Charles, with a defensive smile.

Presently Isabella put down her glass and stood up with a bright controlled face, evidently determined not to be annoyed by this frivolity but to return to the attack later, when Charles had finished being silly.

"I'm going to see Philip into bed," she said. "If you want a bath before dinner, darling, you'd better not be long. Your things are all unpacked." She walked to the door without looking at her mother, but Charles, as he heard the gentle turning of the door-knob, saw Sybil intercept a silent signal. Her eyes, idly following Isabella to the door, were just a shade too blank, and Sybil's expression was never blank accidentally. So I'm to be probed, he thought. About America or Ireland? I wonder which. The kitten handing the mouse over to the cat. God, I'm tired.

"I know you're longing to go and have your barf," said Sybil, "but I haven't seen you for so long, Charles, and I want to talk to you." Charles reluctantly relaxed his stomach muscles, which had been preparing for escape, and made an effort to seem appreciative.

"Wouldn't I be nicer to talk to when I'm clean? I still feel very sordid from the journey."

"No, well, now Isabella's not wiv us for a moment it's raver a chance. She's getting ve'y jumpy about ve war, Charles, vat's what makes her raver irritable. Of course, we all are. Vat's why I came over a monf earlier van I'd planned. I couldn't bear it if any-fing happened and you all got cut off. In vese times one clings raver desperately to ve people one loves—don't you fink so, Charles?"

She had dropped her amused expression now, and was gazing at him with a look of affectionate understanding, as though, now Isabella was gone, they could open their hearts frankly. Charles noticed, too, though he was not altogether able to resist its charm, her old habit of making great use of his Christian name, speaking it often and in a conscious, caressing manner, as though she loved it. "You do know, don't you, Charles, vat I'm absolutely devoted to you and Isabella?"

"You're very good, Sybil. It's a tremendous thing to offer to carry us away like that, but you do see, don't you, that in my case it's quite impossible? I don't want to stand in the way of Isabella and the children, but the thing Isabella doesn't realise is that—quite frankly—one doesn't *want* to throw away the work of years and decamp to another country. One has a feeling of attachment and responsibility."

"Yes, well, vat's what I wanted to talk to you about. Isabella wants to go back wiv me, ve'y much, but I don't fink she wants to leave you behind. It's ve'y understandable. On ve uvver hand, if you've any *uvver* reason for not wanting to go, if it's anyfing *real*, Charles, perhaps I could help to smooove fings out between you."

"I've told you my real reason," said Charles, "but it would help if you could make Isabella understand my point of view."

"I *know*," said Sybil warmly. "I'll do what I can. But I'm not altogever certain vat I understand it myself. I'm not a fought-reader, Charles. I only know vat ve gallery can't be ve only fing vat's keeping you."

"If you were a thought-reader, dear Sybil, you'd see that it was. And I've always suspected that a thought-reader was exactly what you were. I'm sorry to have that romantic idea dispelled."

"Well, alas, dispelled it must be. Vough we've got a lot in common, more van you know, I've often fought vat in some ways I understood you better van Isabella."

Yes, thought Charles, but you won't get it out of me that way. Don't forget that I know you of old as a spy on both sides: God knows what pleasure you get out of it. He set down his glass and stood up, remembering with sudden anger the mysterious letter of which Miss Bagnold had spoken. "I'd better go and have my bath," he said, looking down with a frown at the letters scattered

on the hearthrug. Sybil followed his gaze, then put up her hand gently to detain him and gave his unresponsive fingers a slight pressure.

"Don't go yet, Charles. You haven't told me yet about your holiday in Ireland. I fink it was raver sweet of you to take Miriam. Did you have a good time?"

"Yes, thank you," said Charles, disengaging his hand with some embarrassment on the excuse of taking and lighting a cigarette. "It wasn't very long, though. I had to come back for some gallery business, as you know."

"Yes, fortunately for me. Uvverwise, how would we ever have got in touch wiv you? I fink Isabella was a bit peeved vat you wrote to vat person at ve gallery and not to her."

"I'm not such a letter writer as you are," said Charles, meeting her eyes with a sort of trembling hostility. (Now I'm in for it, he thought; she knows what this is about.) But Sybil, apparently placidly unconscious of his accusation, was taking her time.

"I've never been vere," she said, idly waving her cigarette. "Is it ve'y attractive? Did you meet anybody you knew? Didn't vat old flame of yours have a home in Ireland, or somefing?"

Charles hesitated. "I don't know anybody in Ireland," he said, and then, seeing from her raised eyebrows that she was waiting for something further, recklessly took the plunge. "At least, I do now. I came across a lady called Miss Bagnold, who appeared to have heard of you."

"Why, vis is fame indeed," said Sybil, laughing; "may one ask in what connection?"

"One may," said Charles. "You wrote to her once, or to her niece, Eileen Oram. I'd give a lot to know, even now, what you made it your business to say."

"Charles, you're angry! wiv *me!* Why, how preposterous. If ever you owed me gratitude for anyfing, dear Charles, it was for vat. Of course I'll tell you what I said, if I can remember. Don't tell me you've borne me a grudge about it all vese years? How many years ago is it, Charles? Eleven, twelve? You extraordinary creature!"

"It was ten years ago," said Charles, sitting down on the arm of the sofa with the resolution that now he had burned his boats he

would at least satisfy angry curiosity. "And I haven't borne you a grudge about it all these years because I never knew you'd done it until a few days ago. I'm simply curious, that's all. It was a piece of cleverness on your part that I'd never dreamed of."

"Well, Charles, it wasn't cleverness so much as common sense. Vat poor girl, you know. Vat's where attractive men are so often cruel, vey don't realise vat when a fing's finished for *vem*, vey may still be leaving a lot of untidy ends about which lead to all sorts of paffetic little hopes and plans which are doomed to come to nuffing and make uvver people terribly unhappy."

"So it was a mission of mercy," said Charles heavily. "I see. And how did you accomplish it?"

"Well, Charles, you really had been ve'y naughty, you know. I'm not scolding you, I know how one shrinks from tackling vese situations. Oh, I *know*. Least said soonest mended—such a comfortable motto, Charles, but such a fallacy!"

"You evidently don't believe in it."

"Well, sometimes, Charles, but not in vis case. You see, I was really doing somefing which *you* ought to have done. You were really raver cruel to vat poor girl, you know, to leave ve whole fing in ve air like vat; so indecisive."

"I may have been indecisive," said Charles, "but Eileen wasn't. Didn't you notice that? Your letter must have seemed rather impertinent to her. And what did you *say*? I must say I think you ought to have consulted me about it."

"Oh, my dear, I can't remember after all vis time. And impertinence isn't quite ve word to use to me. I'm an old woman, Charles, I see vese fings from ve outside. It was only common decency to let vat poor girl know vat you had no intention whatever of leaving Isabella."

"So that was what you did," said Charles, looking down at his cigarette. There was a long silence. How Eileen must have despised him all this time, believing as she must have done that he had been too cowardly even to deliver the final blow himself, but had handed the weapon instead to Isabella's mother! "Well, it's a long time ago," he said at last, "but I must say I still find it hard to forgive you, Sybil."

"I know, my dear. Vat's unjust, but understandable. It's a pity you didn't know about it long ago, and ven you wouldn't be having vis recrudescence of romantic feeling about a ve'y fird-rate person. Ev'ybody saw it but yourself. She was never worf ve unhappiness you went frough."

"M'm," said Charles, still frowning at his cigarette. "Eileen was a very exceptional person, as it happens, but the last thing I want to do is argue about it."

"Oh *no*, Charles! She was ve'y insignificant. Forgive me, my dear, but it was so apparent to ev'ybody what she was after! She was on ve make, Charles, a little nobody wivout any background or even talent, who fought it was easy to get anuvver woman's husband when she hadn't one of her own. And look at her subsequent history! You weren't ve only one, my poor Charles. You ought to be fankful vat ve affair ended when it did, wivout any sordid complications."

"What do you mean?" said Charles, startled. "I don't know anything about her subsequent history."

"You don't? Oh well, my dear boy, perhaps it's just as well. If you want to keep vis little shrine of memory aglow you'd better not ask questions."

"But I am asking them. How do you come to know anything about her? You can't just make damaging statements like that without explaining them. What is this life of crime you're hinting at? I believe you're making it up as you go along."

"Ah, if I were! How nice it would be, Charles, if people always remained on veir little pedestals! Vough mind you, I've no wish in ve world to be censorious. I've seen too much of life, I know what it's made of. One person's way of life is not anuvver's. But *you*—vat's anuvver matter. You're too fine a person, Charles, ever to have been mixed up wiv vat sort of little creature. Anyway, it was a long time ago; let's not quarrel about it. Ve most fastidious men have veir lapses of taste. It's nuffing to be ashamed of."

"If I am ashamed," said Charles, "it's of myself, not Eileen. Come on, Sybil, tell me what you're hinting at. You obviously mean to, or you'd never have brought up the subject. You and Isabella are just alike. You never can resist prolonging any agony."

"My poor Charles, is it still agony? How cruel of me; I'd never have broached it if I'd dreamed vat you hadn't known. I only found out by accident, in ve way one does in vis mysteriously small world. Once one touches ve fringe of a circle, it seems one never entirely gets away from it." She threw her cigarette in the grate and began with a sigh to gather up her letters.

"Go on," said Charles.

"Well, I'd hardly given ve girl a fought for years, but it seems Graham knew ve Rovedinos slightly; vey came out to California free or four years ago, and I got to know Alice Rovedino raver well. She's always a little bit unhappy about her husband, pore fing, and one day she told me vis story among uvvers, and mentioned ve girl's name, never dreaming vat I could possibly know anyfing about her."

"And what was the story?" said Charles, feeling suddenly cold. So now he was to be shown some hidden chapter of Eileen's life, in which he had no part, and it was going to be painful. His heart contracted, waiting for the blow.

"Well, ve story was," said Sybil, as though reluctantly, "vat some time after your affair wiv her, vis girl met Eddie Rovedino, who's raver well off, you know, one of vose men who always keep a finger in ve theatre. And vere was a long affair, and he kept her for monfs, and in ve end he had to send her away to ve country to have a baby. Ve expense was ve'y heavy, Alice said, and Eddie was ve'y sick of it before ve end. I don't fink vey see her now, but I suppose he pays her an allowance for ve child. He's not a man I care for particularly myself, but he's ve'y generous wiv money. I suppose she knew vat."

Charles pressed out his cigarette in an ash tray, not looking at Sybil. "I don't suppose for a moment it's the same person," he said.

"My dear! Wiv vat name? And besides, Alice described her to me exactly. A young actress, she said, struggling along on tup-pence, not a ve'y good one. A tall, raver fin girl wiv short curly hair. Of course it was ve same."

"Well," said Charles, getting up, "we can't pretend it's any of our business, I suppose. I haven't seen her for ten years, I wouldn't know whether it was true or not." He was struck by a saving

thought. "But I saw her aunt in Ireland, and though she talked quite freely about Eileen she never said a word about a child."

"No, why should she? It isn't ve sort of fing you discuss wiv strangers. Besides, it may have died. Vat would have been ve best fing, really, wouldn't it?"

"But Miss Bagnold struck me as a very transparent person. She's not the kind of woman to take a family scandal of that sort in her stride. I don't believe she'd have mentioned Eileen at all if there'd been anything like that to conceal."

"My dear, ve most strait-laced women will conceal anyfing, when it comes to a pinch. Besides, if she was so ve'y proper, Charles, why was she being agreeable to you at all? She ought to regard you as ve aufor of her niece's ruin."

"She does," said Charles gloomily, "and she wasn't agreeable at all once she'd realised who I was. It ended up as quite an unpleasant interview."

"Well, you might have known! What on earf induced you to go vere at all, Charles? I call vat heroism."

"Oh, I just happened to find I was near the place, and I didn't realise there was all this rancour about. By the way, I haven't said anything to Isabella."

"My dear boy, you don't have to warn me. I never utter anyfing. I know Isabella's limitations as well as you do. She's one of vose jealous women; she can't help it, pore sweet, but it makes her unable to cope wiv vose fings vat wives have to cope wiv calmly if life's to remain comfortable."

"I must go and have my bath," said Charles. "I don't know how we got into this painful discussion. I can't say I'm very grateful to you, Sybil, though I dare say you meant it kindly. Anyway, it's a very long time ago, isn't it? There's really no sense in raking it all up again."

"You're *so* right, Charles, and I'd never have breaved a word if I'd dreamed you didn't know. You know I'm devoted to you, Charles, ve last fing I want to do is to upset you."

"You haven't upset me."

"Ven vere's no harm done, and of course I shan't say a word to Isabella. She's finking of nuffing at ve moment but persuading you

to come to California. I hope for my own selfish sake, Charles, vat you do come."

"That's very nice of you, Sybil. I'll think it over."

At dinner that night the discussion about America was resumed, and Charles made a weary effort to keep his mind on the conversation, aware that there were too many currents of feeling below its surface for him to risk a moment's relaxed attention. There was first, pervading the atmosphere and robbing it of all ease, the old unadmitted nervous tension which always manifested itself when Isabella and her mother were together. Sybil never appeared conscious of this tiny strain, unless it were by an occasional faintly patronising flicker of an eyelid in Isabella's direction, as though she were aware of her daughter's hidden effort to maintain ascendancy, and dismissed it with amusement; but on Isabella's part the effort was clearly visible to an onlooker, or at least to Charles, who had long been skeptical of her avowed attitude of admiring adoration of her mother. It showed in her more than usually elaborate make-up, in the fact that the food was noticeably grander than usual (though this was crossly denied if appreciatively commented on), and the nervous way her eye followed the parlourmaid round the table, prophesying mistakes. She talked, too, in her social manner, all cool brightness and ready laughter and rather too much of both, as though she were charming a stranger, and was unusually ready in anecdote to drag in any reference likely to impress. It was as though she were always tacitly saying, "You see, I manage very well on my own account. Everything that I have and wear is extremely smart, and Charles is attractive and devoted and I can wind him round my little finger. Everybody, even my mother, must surely be aware of it." But Sybil had a most maddeningly subtle and experienced way of seeming not to notice, even when her expression was most affectionate and her speech most flattering; she displayed an unerring selectiveness in praising the wrong thing, in admiring some one or other of Isabella's arrangements with a warmth of tone which to a defensive ear implied that it was a welcome change for the better; and running throughout the whole

texture of her behaviour to Isabella was the faint but to Charles unmistakable glint of mockery. Against the tide of her mother's personality Isabella swam tirelessly, but in vain.

Then, on this particular evening, there was Isabella's anxiety to persuade, which made her cajoling and querulous by turns, and suspicious of Charles's excuses. He for his part was unsure of her reason for wishing to go to America; if it were really fear of a coming war and the danger to the children, well and good; but if, on the other hand, there were concealed reasons, if she guessed more than she would admit about his own state of mind and was determined to get him out of harm's way while yet there was time, then there was every need to be wary. He would not go, and his heart beat nervously at the hope that Isabella might be at last content to go without him.

And then, as if this were not enough, there was Sybil watching him across the table like a benevolent boa-constrictor, creating her terrible illusion of being able to read one's thoughts, and smiling under her heavy eyelids with the amusement of her knowledge. She was interested, evidently, in the effect of her communications about Eileen, and consequently took delighted note of his resistance to Isabella—and all with the detached Olympian enjoyment of a sensual goddess observing them from a cloud. One came very soon to feel that it was dangerous to think in front of her at all, and tried not to—which had a disintegrating effect on the conversation and was in any case absurd; and Charles found, besides, that fatigue kept washing over him in warm waves, drawing his thoughts down and backwards from the level of the table like pebbles on a beach, into private and disturbing depths, where Eileen's image drifted, aloof and strange, unconsciously revenged.

Was it possible that Sybil's story was really true? He denied it to himself with snatches of argument, and yet, when he tried to look at them dispassionately, they proved nothing. Distrusting Sybil utterly, knowing her for a schemer of irresponsible motives, he yet could not honestly say that he had ever proved her a liar. She suppressed information when it suited her, intrigued on either side as a matter of course and manipulated situations for her own amusement—but he never remembered her weakening her hand with a palpable falsehood. And besides, why should it be untrue?

He had finished with Eileen's life long ago, it was unreasonable to feel jealousy or grief over anything she had subsequently done with it. It was possible to fall in love a second time; it was possible to have a baby; the only thing, he told himself, which he was entitled to reject was Sybil's too facile assumption that the story was sordid. Yet it was difficult to imagine circumstances which would clear it of the dreadful atmosphere of deterioration, of going progressively downhill. The Rovedinos, Sybil had said, no longer saw her; she had been hidden away in the country and there had been payments of money; there was not a shred of comfort or dignity to cling to.

And yet, in spite of the weight of mingled jealousy and depression, there was some element in his knowledge of the essential Eileen which cried out in uneasy scorn of Sybil's tale. Whatever distance Eileen had put between herself and him in the course of years, it was not this dreary waste. She could not, no, *could* not have become that drab complaining figure, object of compassion and distaste. There was a quality of spirit about her which made it impossible.

Held suddenly still by this conviction in the middle of something he was saying, Charles broke off abruptly and fidgeted with his glass, then cleared his throat and finished the sentence at random. For once Sybil seemed not to be aware of him; she was leaning forward with her elbows on the table, turning her packet of French cigarettes in her fingers and blowing smoke through her nostrils, considering what she would say next; and instantly the spell of her watchfulness was broken, and Charles escaped with relief and joy into a region of imagination which neither she nor Isabella had power to reach and where for an instant dangerously prolonged he confronted his desires. In this rarefied air fatigue and indecision were dissolved and he recognised at last with longing the face that had eluded him so long, Eileen's face in its moments of deepest peace, warm with contentment and love and with the weight of her dark beautiful little skull lying heavily in his hand.

Oh, Eileen, my love, my darling . . .

"Charles," said Isabella clearly, laying an admonishing hand on the polished table, "you're wool-gathering, darling. Mother was asking you something."

"I'm sorry," said Charles, rousing himself, "I'm afraid I'm rather tired." He looked at Isabella and then at Sybil, feeling a cold surprise.

What am I doing at this table, sitting with strangers? Isabella is nothing to me and Sybil is an old harlot still looking out for trade.

"I was saying, dear Charles," said Sybil, "vat I ought to go down to Oxenwood vis weekend, and vat I fink Isabella ought to come too, wiv Philip, and see ve relations. Is vere any hope of getting you to come wiv us? It's boring, I know, but I have to do ve polite; I haven't taken any notice of vem for years."

"Must you really? What a tiger you are for doing your duty," said Charles, smiling crookedly at the thought of Sybil's passionate concealed regard for her titled connections. It was almost Iris Pillow's technique—taking care to flick them with cosmopolitan contempt whenever they were mentioned, but taking even greater care to go down among them when occasion offered, enveloped in a rich aura of American smartness, to gather fresh material for social impressiveness when she returned to California. Sybil seemed never entirely to have lost the feeling that Mrs. Graham Gentry was simply a capricious pseudonym for Lady Oxenwood.

"Do come, darling," said Isabella, "count it as part of your holiday." But he could tell from a hint of reserve in her expression that his presence, on this expedition at least, was not indispensable. Visits to Oxenwood were rituals which Isabella enjoyed, and she liked them best when she could go supported by her mother's influence, since her uncle, usurper of her dead father's and her own prestige, was not rich, and there were many subtle ways of laying baits for envy—little harmless pleasures which Charles was apt to spoil.

"Are you taking Miriam?" said Charles, testing his theory.

"Darling, no. We can't exactly descend in a horde, like locusts."

"But if I came, wouldn't we be just as much of a horde?"

"No, because you wouldn't seem nearly as locust-like as a mob of children."

"But you can't leave Miriam all by herself in the house."

"I'm not going to. I shall send her down to the cottage and she can have Pamela to stay. Mrs. Swann will look after them."

"Well, I think, if you don't mind, I'll let Mrs. Swann look after

me too. Or I may stay here; Aubrey's trying to fix a lunch appointment with Brabazon. After all, it was what I came back for; I don't think I can disappear with you down into Norfolk; much as I should like to."

"Well, do as you like, of course. But it seems a lot of trouble to take about a very bad painter. I'm sure it won't do the gallery any good to give him a show. Most people think his work simply laughable."

"I know you don't get any pleasure out of it, but there's something there all the same. I find him tremendously interesting, and so do a few other people. I shall be surprised if there isn't a great scramble for him in a few years' time."

"Oh," said Sybil, suddenly alert, "is he worf buying, Charles? I'm simply mad for Graham to start buying pictures—modern ones, of course, he's too late in ve market, obviously, for old masters."

"Yes," said Charles. "I think one or two Brabazons would be a good investment. But then, you mightn't like them."

"Possibly," said Sybil laughing, "but I should be guided by you in vat. I don't 'set up to be a critic of modern art; my taste was formed more van firty years ago, in Paris. My mind got fixed, like a photograph, among ve Post Impressionists."

"You'd simply hate Brabazon," said Isabella, with some heat, "his pictures are just a whirling mess of colour. He doesn't know how to draw."

"He's learning, though," said Charles, "he'll find out, sooner or later."

"But darling, he's not a boy. He must be nearly forty if he's a day."

"He's thirty-seven."

"Well! If you can't draw by that time! No, Mother, you'd hate his pictures, you would really. They'd give Graham the horrors."

"Oh, vat wouldn't matter a bit. What he'd really enjoy would be a nice early tip on ve market. If he was ve only man in America wiv a collection of Brabazons he'd come to worship vem. Unless of course vey slumped or did anyfing dreadful. Fink of pore Oxenwood wiv a dining-room full of Tademas!"

"I often think of them," said Charles, "they hypnotised me the first time I came to stay with you."

"He used to love vem when he was a young man, vough," said Sybil, "vey reminded him of me. If I'd wanted to frow him into real ecstasies I'd have sat all day on a marble bench, feeding pigeons."

"And didn't you? I think it was rather unkind of you not to oblige him."

"Oh, no. His ecstasies were always ve'y exhausting. It was really simpler to let him take to ve bottle."

They drank their coffee in the drawing-room by the open window, surrounded by the dying scent of the blown roses which Isabella had brought with her from the country, and by the dry odour of cooling summer pavements exhaling their stony breath in emptiness now that dusk was gathering slowly in the trees of the square. Charles fixed his eyes on the trees and smoked in silence, hardly listening to the talk between Sybil and Isabella, who had withdrawn for the time being into a female world and were making no effort to include him in the conversation. At length, throwing the end of his cigar like a tiny firework through the open window, he stood up and produced a number of unopened letters from his pocket.

"I'd better just go and look through these," he said, "there might be something that needs an answer tonight," and waiting only long enough to answer the murmur of protest, went with deliberate slowness out of the room and closed the door behind him.

From the landing above, muffled by another door and the soft pedal, he could hear an air being played haltingly over and over on the morning-room piano, punctuated from another quarter by the whirr of a sewing-machine. He went thoughtfully upstairs. The door of a room on the right was slightly ajar, letting out a yellow beam of workroom light. Evidently Miss Doddington—Doddy to everybody in the house—was engaged on her endless labours, turning cuffs, mending pillow-cases, fruitlessly pursuing Miriam's growth through tuck and hem. Charles passed the door

with caution and with the faint sense of guilt he always felt when he encountered her unwearying activities without giving her the little reward that she liked best—a few minutes' bright conversation round the edge of the door. She had been a hidden factor in the household for so long, first as Miriam's nurse, then as Philip's, and finally as perpetual sempstress and factotum, giving off a characteristic odour of damp cloths and ironing boards, that it was difficult to remember that her life had a pulse of its own. What compensations could experience have offered her that had induced her to stay, drifting into old age in the backstairs and hidden portion of the house, making it her home? None, apparently, but that she had let the opportunity of change slip by her years ago, and now had come to lead other people's lives by proxy, through the children and Isabella.

Pricked by remorse, Charles hesitated and turned back, and pushed the door of the sewing-room gingerly open. Up went the grey head eagerly at once into the area of shadow above the green cardboard shade hung low over the machine, and the treadling stopped.

"Hullo, Doddy. Working hard and late as usual, I see."

"Good gracious, Mr. Denham, you gave me quite a start! Oh my word, yes, you've no idea how much there is to do before they go back to school, and now that Mrs. Denham's talking of going to America, I simply don't know where to begin."

"Don't worry, you'll manage it all beautifully, you always do," said Charles. ("Make her feel indispensable," Isabella always said, "it's all she wants.") He made a slight explanatory movement with the hand holding the letters. "I was just going to write a few letters in the morning-room. I think I hear Miriam practising."

"She's not really practising, Mr. Denham, she's just playing about with an old song-book. I hope you couldn't hear her in the drawing-room? I told her to keep the soft pedal down all the time, but she ought to be going to have her bath, really. I'll run and tell her."

"No, don't bother, Doddy. I'll tell her myself. I like to hear her playing."

"Well, she is getting on quite nicely, Mr. Denham. I think she has quite a pretty little voice, myself."

Charles nodded pleasantly and withdrew, but slowly, wishing to appear reluctant to end this pleasant conversation. He went softly across the landing to the door of the morning-room and paused with his hand on the knob, his head bent, listening to the soft breathy treble of Miriam's voice, trying out her song.

"O that I were where Helen lies!
Night and day on me she cries;
Out of my bed she bids me rise,
Says, 'Haste, and come to me!'"

The notes followed the voice irregularly, with eager stumblings and corrections, then with scarcely a pause began at the beginning again. Charles opened the door, rattling the knob a little, deliberately, so as not to startle her. Miriam swung round at once on the piano stool, her spectacles flashing.

"Oh, it's you. I thought it was Doddy coming to tell me to go to bed."

"I said I'd do it for her, but you needn't hurry if you don't want to. I rather like to hear you playing."

Miriam looked suspicious for a moment, and then smiled, a surprising, sweet, mouth-curling smile. "Do you really?" She twirled round and began to turn the pages of the song book. "I found this book among a lot of old Ladies' Journals that Doddy's got. There's some of the songs in it that we've done at school."

"I like that one you were playing just now; what's it called?"

"Oh, that one. 'Helen of Kirkconnell.' I like it one of the best, it's an easy accompaniment."

"It's rather sad, though," said Charles, taking the book from the piano and looking at the ragged paper cover, as though he expected it to tell him something. "How does it go on?"

"It's rather long," said Miriam, taking the book out of his hands and searching importantly through the pages, "that verse comes several times. And then there's another"—she cleared her throat and threw up her head, blushing faintly, in what was evidently an elocution class manner—"O Helen fair, beyond compare! I'll mak a garland o' thy hair, shall bind my heart for evermair, Until

the day I dee!’ And then the chorus comes again. I’m afraid you’ve lost the place.”

“Well, never mind,” said Charles, touching her hair gently, “perhaps you’d better go to bed now, after all. I promised Daddy I’d tell you.”

Miriam closed the book and the piano and got up without speaking. She put the book on top of the piano and covered it carefully with several sheets of music, then stood quite still, partly turned away from him, her face hidden.

“Are we really going to America?” she said, taking her hands slowly from the pile of music.

“I don’t think your mother’s decided yet. We’ve just been talking about it.”

“Are you going, Daddy?”

“No, I’m not going. I can’t.”

“I don’t want to go without you,” said Miriam in a whisper.

Charles looked at her with a sudden pang of compunction; he put out his hand to comfort her and slipped it through the crook of her arm.

“Well, nothing’s decided, darling; I shouldn’t worry. I promise not to agree to anything without telling you first.”

“Thank you,” said Miriam in a guarded voice. She turned round to him doubtfully, then gave him a quick hug with her long arms and kissed his cheek. “Well, perhaps I’d better go to bed now. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” said Charles, feeling somehow inadequate. Would he ever be able to make it up to her in any way?

When she had gone he switched on the desk lamp and sat down to open his letters, and then, having skimmed through them, took writing paper and envelopes out of a drawer, unscrewed his fountain pen, and wrote several lines of a businesslike reply. Not until he had completed these precautions did he draw the leather-bound telephone directory towards him.

Rovedino . . . preposterous, roguish, foreign-sounding name. . . . His finger ran rapidly down the page and came to rest. There was only one, with an address in Church Street and a Flaxman number. “Mr. and Mrs. Rovedino of Chelsea. . . .” He wrote down the address and telephone number on the back of an envelope, put

away the directory and wrote a couple of letters; then, lighting a cigarette and with an appearance of briskness, ran downstairs and opened the drawing-room door.

"I'm just going along to post some letters. Can I take any for either of you?"

"Yes, indeed," said Sybil, speaking out of the darkness, "you can take a whole collection for me, Charles, vat's ve'y kind."

She switched on a shaded lamp beside her and wandered across to another table to find her letters. Isabella, curled in a corner of the sofa with a glass and cigarette, blinked at Charles enquiringly, but said nothing. He took Sybil's letters, Isabella's familiar envelopes made strange by air-mail stamps and Sybil's bold dominating hand, and went downstairs, feeling in his pockets as he went to make sure he had some coppers.

He crossed the square, walking rapidly, turned a corner, crossed the next street, and went through a paved alley into a street of small houses and shuttered shops. Further on this was crossed by a broader, more important street, and here, in the light of a corner lamp, was a telephone box. Its light was on; there was somebody in it, of course. Charles waited, glancing up and down the street, jingling the money in his pockets. The man in the telephone box was not talking, just leaning against the glass side with the receiver to his ear and his eyes closed; he looked as though he might have been there for hours. Why on earth doesn't he give it up and go away if he can't get an answer, thought Charles. He strolled round the side of the box and looked menacingly in through the glass. The man opened his eyes and closed them again, but neither spoke nor moved. Presently he straightened himself, showing signs of animation, took a piece of paper out of his pocket, from which he began to read aloud into the telephone, very slowly, with many pauses during which he listened and apparently explained obtruse points. Charles looked at his watch, studied the addresses of Sybil's letters, and strolled pointedly up and down past the side of the box, irritably straining his ears to hear what the man was saying. "That's right . . . seventy-five feet o' two-inch lead pipe . . . that's right, guv'nor. . . ." What an unlikely conversation to be having at ten o'clock at night. . . .

Suddenly the door pushed open and the man came out, shaking

tobacco ash from his coat and waistcoat. Charles brushed past him into the stale hot smoky cell and with a feeling of distaste rubbed the still warm receiver on the sleeve of his coat. When he had dialled he propped the door open with his foot and waited, inclining his head to the current of clean night air.

"Hullo? May I speak to Mr. Rovedino, please?"

"He's not here, I'm afraid," said a woman's voice, sounding rather tired, "can I take a message for him? It's Mrs. Rovedino speaking."

"Er, thank you," said Charles, disappointed and at the same time relieved, and also curiously encouraged by the faded voice. "I wonder if you can tell me when he'll be back? My name's Denham; I wanted to see him if possible."

"Well, he's gone away for the weekend; is it anything I can do? My husband won't be back until Sunday evening."

Charles hesitated, unable to decide what line to take.

"If it's anything to do with business," said the voice kindly, "you'd better ring him at his office, I think, on Monday morning."

"Well, it's just a personal matter. Perhaps . . . I wonder if you would allow me to come and see you, instead? I'm anxious to get in touch with somebody . . . with Miss Eileen Oram as a matter of fact . . . and I understood from her aunt that you might know her address."

"Oh dear," said Mrs. Rovedino, "I'm afraid I don't, not at the moment. My husband might, perhaps. What did you say your name was?"

"Denham," said Charles, and added hastily, to cover this possibly damaging admission, "I used to know Miss Oram, some years ago."

"I see," said the voice doubtfully. There was a pause. "Well, I'm afraid I don't know where she is at present. I'm so sorry I can't help you."

"I wonder, though, whether you would let me come and see you for a few moments, in any case? It sounds an odd thing to ask, but I think it would be helpful. I should be very grateful."

"Well . . . I don't know what to say. I remember your name, I think. Perhaps it would really be better if you saw my husband." The voice had become cautious now, and rather sad. "Yes, that would be best, if you care to come in after dinner on Sunday eve-

ning. Of course I can't say for certain that he'll be able to help you."

"That's terribly kind of you, Mrs. Rovedino. May I come in about nine o'clock, just for a few minutes?"

"Yes; but hadn't you better give me your telephone number? In case he can't see you, you know. I can't really promise anything without asking him."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," said Charles quickly, "you see I haven't . . . at least, I shall probably be going into the country myself. I'd rather take the risk, if you don't mind, and hope that he can see me."

"Well, if you don't mind risking it . . ."

"Not a bit," said Charles, in a hurry to end the conversation before any further conditions could be imposed, "it's really very kind of you, I'm so grateful . . . Goodbye!"

He hung up the receiver quickly, cutting across a doubtful murmur from Mrs. Rovedino, and stumbling out of the telephone box walked rapidly away as though afraid that its bell might ring protestingly after him.

5. From the first moment of seeing Edward Rovedino, Charles knew, with sinking heart, that he was going to dislike him. There had been nothing in the appearance of the house, in the butler's expressionless face, in the heavy, rather aggressive and snobbish expensiveness of rugs and furniture and everything that he saw as he was led silently upstairs, to reassure him; and now, facing this well-dressed and rather saturnine-looking man who remained planted on the hearthrug as Charles advanced to meet him, he felt despondently that he had been a fool to come, that nothing could come of it.

"This is very good of you," he said, coming to a standstill and feeling uncomfortably conscious of his empty hands.

"Not at all," said Mr. Rovedino, giving him a sharp look from under his thick eyebrows and not responding to Charles's ill-timed smile. Then, fidgeting importantly with his glossy cuffs, he cleared his throat and allowed his face to soften into a more social expression, as though conscious of appearing suspicious and somewhat hostile. "You know my wife?" he said, waving a large white hand in the direction of the window.

Charles turned, and saw a small, grey-haired and beautifully neat woman who came out of the dusk by the long curtains and stepped lightly across the carpet to give him her hand. As she came into the soft light of the fireside lamp he saw that she was pretty in a dry, faded, sympathetic way; her hair, which at first glance had seemed merely grey, was revealed as a charming halo of fragile

curls closely following the shape of her small head, and the hand which she put for an instant into his was cool and delicate. She was dressed in the deadest black it was possible to imagine, with long tight sleeves and a high neck, against which her triple necklace of pearls and the large plain single pearl on the lobe of each ear made an almost startling impression of rich severity.

"How do you do?" she said, looking at him with her head on one side and smiling with her eyes only, "let's see; you're Graham Gentry's son-in-law—aren't you?"

This simple question struck Charles with appalling shock, draining the meaning out of his face and leaving him staring at her with an expression of stupidity. In all the anxious thought which he had given to this interview, during all the hours he had spent brooding on Sybil's story—working jealously backwards and forwards over all possible interpretations of Eileen's relationship with Edward Rovedino, hoping that at last he had found the clue, however painful, which would lead him to her, but at the same time fearing that Rovedino must have learned something of his own history from Eileen, so that he should expect hostility—the possibility that they would remember his name only in connection with the Gentrys had never once occurred to him. He had been so absorbed by the story which Sybil had told him, so wretchedly obsessed by his own feelings concerning its truth or untruth, that he had never paused to consider how she had learned it; and while straining to account for the Rovedinos in relation to Eileen, had omitted to remember their more recent connection with Sybil. The horror produced by this sudden realisation was almost as great as if he had found Sybil, who had gone to Oxenwood for the weekend with Isabella, smiling and smoking on the Rovedinos' sofa. He had the same angrily helpless sensation of having walked into a trap.

The rush of confused ideas which sprang instantly to his mind prevented him from replying to Mrs. Rovedino's social question, which had been intended merely to put him at his ease, so that for a moment he only gazed at her in silence. Was her apparently kindly approach, then, due to the fact that she thought of him as Sybil's son-in-law, and had never connected him with the tale of woe she had poured into Sybil's ear in California? And if this were so, surely Sybil had been miraculously reticent? Had she simply

made sure, from Mrs. Rovedino's description, that the girl was Eileen—and then said nothing? Knowing Sybil, of course, this was perfectly possible. On the other hand, Rovedino himself had not smiled or looked in the least welcoming when he arrived, and had impressed Charles with the disquieting feeling that he knew everything about him, probably from Eileen, and disapproved of him. It was a paralysing situation to have walked into.

Becoming aware, as the thrill of shock subsided, of a faint expression of surprise in Mrs. Rovedino's face, he made an effort to pull himself together, and smiled and shook his head as if at a momentary foolishness.

"Yes . . . yes, of course. Just for the moment . . . you see, I've never met Graham Gentry, I never think of myself in connection with him. But of course, yes, he's married to my wife's mother." He shook his head again, as though amused and exasperated by his own stupidity.

Mrs. Rovedino looked at him enquiringly, puzzled by his confusion, then made a kindly effort to come to his rescue.

"I hope that Mrs. Gentry is quite well?" she said.

"Oh yes," said Charles, noticing that she had not used Sybil's Christian name, "oh yes, she's over here, you know. But I expect you knew that."

"No, I didn't. How nice," said Mrs. Rovedino. "Won't you sit down? No, I haven't seen Mrs. Gentry for several years. She's a very vital person; I've often thought of her."

Charles sank down gingerly in one of the big armchairs and Mrs. Rovedino sat on the sofa opposite. The dark form of her husband loomed between them on the hearthrug; he looked from one to the other in a considering way, but said nothing. Charles's momentary hope on detecting what he thought was a lack of warmth in Mrs. Rovedino's mention of Sybil was quickly dispelled by the awkward silence which followed. He began to feel frightened.

"You . . . you stayed with them in California, I think?" he said, avoiding looking at Rovedino and feeling the absurdity of settling down to small-talk in this alien room, when what he had come for, in his imbecile egotism, had been answers to two totally unaskable questions— Were you at one time Eileen Oram's lover? And where can I find her?

"Oh no, never," said Mrs. Rovedino quickly, and then hesitated, as though aware that it would be rude, to him, to appear even faintly eager to deny it. "No; we met them both, some years ago, when we were over in America. My husband contacted Mr. Gentry in the course of business, and they were very kind to us while we were there. Americans are so wonderfully hospitable, aren't they? And they have such a lovely house."

"Oh, I see," said Charles. "I thought you must know them awfully well, as you seemed to know my name."

"Well, I thought I did, you know," said Mrs. Rovedino with a little smile, putting up a thin hand and beginning to fidget nervously with her pearls, "but afterwards I wasn't sure. You rang off rather suddenly, you know, or I should have asked you. And then I asked my husband, and he said he remembered your name. And you mentioning Eileen, too. I remembered afterwards."

So it's through Eileen that they know me, thought Charles, and not only through Sybil. I wonder if that's bad or good? I don't like the way that Rovedino goes on saying nothing. . . .

"Yes, there was somebody waiting to use the telephone," he said, stealing a look at Rovedino's profile and glancing away again. "I'm afraid I must have sounded very abrupt." How impossible, how disgusting to suggest that this silent large-nosed man had been Eileen's lover. . . .

"Well, well," said Mrs. Rovedino, getting lightly to her feet with a timid glance at her husband, "I've got some letters to write, so I'll leave you two together if you'll forgive me. I suppose you've had your coffee already and wouldn't care . . . I was just wondering . . ." She looked at her husband doubtfully again, then sighed and smiled at Charles and drifted to the door. Charles found himself alone with Rovedino, and for an interval of painful silence found nothing to say.

Rovedino remained standing on the hearthrug with his hands behind him. He cleared his throat.

"What is it you want to know?" he said at last, drawing his eyebrows together and turning his body slightly in Charles's direction.

"I was in Ireland recently," said Charles, now thoroughly alarmed and quite unable to decide what line to take, "and I went

"Did Miss Bagnold give you our address?" said the other, interrupting him.

"No, she simply mentioned your name. I didn't think of ringing you up until I got back to London."

"I am surprised that she should have seen you at all," said Rovedino, raising his eyebrows. "I always understood that she was a very conventional woman."

A sudden trembling in the solar plexus warned Charles that he was in danger of losing his temper, and he joyfully took advantage of the unexpected sensation, feeling his courage surge up to a pitch of boldness which he knew was reckless but which alone was capable of carrying him forward from his defensive position and making him demand an answer to the questions which were tormenting him.

"I don't think," he said evenly, "that I quite understand what you're implying. You seem to be suggesting something unpleasant, and if that's so, I'd rather you made it clear."

"Oh, come," said Rovedino, shrugging his shoulders and walking away from the hearthrug to turn over some papers on a small writing-table near the window, obviously without looking at them and only with the intention of expressing impatience, "my wife and I have known Eileen Oram for years—eight or nine years at least. It isn't to be supposed that we haven't heard your name before, or that we know nothing about you."

"What do you know about me?" said Charles quickly. "To justify your tone, which is peculiar, to say the least, I'm afraid you must be rather more explicit."

"My tone, to which you object," said Rovedino, still half turned away from him and frowning over his papers, "is one you must be accustomed to by this time, I imagine. You didn't behave in a very creditable manner to Eileen. What I've heard of you doesn't encourage me to give you her address, even if I knew it."

"Did you hear this from Eileen herself?"

"Partly from her, partly from other people. She has a certain reticence, you know."

"You take a surprisingly censorious attitude," said Charles, still buoyed up by anger but at the same time feeling the weakness of his own position, "it isn't always safe—is it?—to believe everything

one's told. I've kept an open mind, for instance, about what I've been told of *your* history in connection with her. I find it too disagreeable to believe."

"I'm not interested in anything you've heard about me," said Rovedino indifferently.

"But if it's true," pursued Charles, feeling his confidence beginning to ebb uneasily under pressure of the other's implacable self-righteousness, "if it's true, you're the last man in the world with any right to be censorious."

"Oh?" said Rovedino, looking up from the table with a curious glint in his eye and coming back to the hearthrug, "and what *did* you hear, which may or may not be true?"

"I was told that she'd had a child by you," said Charles, struggling to maintain a severe and dignified expression, and feeling suddenly ineffably ridiculous, like the noble brother of the heroine in a melodrama. To cover his discomfort he pointlessly took off his spectacles and turned them slowly in his fingers, closing down the shafts.

To his disgust Rovedino burst into loud laughter, throwing back his head and exhibiting strong gums and teeth.

"Good heavens," he said, looking at Charles with eyes moist with ironical amusement, "no, really, forgive me, but you do seem to be such a fool. What a ridiculous interview this is, anyway. I'm sorry, but it's obvious that I can't do anything to help you. Quite frankly, I wouldn't if I could." He walked leisurely to the door, still smiling to himself in an ironical and insulting way, the corners of his mouth turned down, and opened it with a suggestion of mocking flourish, standing aside for Charles.

"Can you find your way down, do you think, or shall I ring?"

"I can find my way quite well," said Charles, "don't let me trouble you, please."

He walked out blindly, not looking at Rovedino, and heard the door close behind him with a heavy click as he began to go downstairs. He saw nothing, and was conscious of nothing but his own rage as he trod soundlessly down the thickly carpeted staircase. His hands were trembling.

He took his hat and gloves from the hall table, and as he did so a door behind him opened and he heard the light click of high

heels over the polished floor. He turned to face Mrs. Rovedino, who was looking at him with her curly head on one side, enquiringly.

"Did you get what you wanted?" she asked in a low voice, almost in a whisper. It was borne in on him that she did not want her husband to hear, and the possibility of a sympathy with himself which this implied made him hesitate, and reject the coldly polite answer which had first suggested itself.

"No," he said, looking at her unwillingly, "but it was kind of you all the same to let me come."

Mrs. Rovedino glanced over her shoulder at the stairs.

"Come in here," she said quietly, and beckoning with a rapid forefinger, went back through the doorway from which she had appeared. Charles followed, and found himself standing in the dusk of an opulently furnished dining-room. Mrs. Rovedino closed the door and switched on the light and then came and leaned her arms on the back of one of the dining-room chairs, regarding Charles seriously across a corner of the table.

"Couldn't my husband give you her address?"

"No. It appears he doesn't know it, but I'm also afraid I've made an unfavourable impression."

"Oh, it's quite possible," said Mrs. Rovedino, shaking her head, "that he really doesn't know where Eileen is. *Quite* possible. She was in London, I know, until a few days ago." She looked at him doubtfully, at once timid and sympathetic, and gave him a faint smile. "I really wish that I could help you," she said.

"Thank you," said Charles. "I'm afraid my request rather annoyed Mr. Rovedino. He seemed disinclined to help me, even if he could."

Mrs. Rovedino made a little dismissing gesture with one hand.

"Oh," she said, "he has very positive ideas. He's a wonderful person, you know, in many ways, but he has these little blind spots. It's really a sort of jealousy—well, no,—resentment perhaps, at the bottom of it."

Charles leaned his arms on the back of a chair and gazed for a moment in silence at Mrs. Rovedino. There was something indefinable about her which arrested his attention. She seemed to wish for some reason to confide in him and at the same time to feel that

she ought not to do so. Something told him that beneath her calm and fastidious exterior there was dissatisfaction, and that she was aware of his distress of mind and longed to communicate her own.

"It's very kind of you to tell me this," he said after a pause. A muscle in Mrs. Rovedino's cheek quivered, and she put up her handkerchief to cover it.

"Do let me give you a drink," she said suddenly, still holding her scrap of a handkerchief to her face and going over to the sideboard. "You must think me very rude and inhospitable."

"Oh no, please," said Charles, straightening himself and taking his hands from the back of the chair, and feeling the utter impossibility of accepting a drink in Rovedino's dining-room, into which that hostile character himself might walk at any moment. "No, really, I don't want anything."

But Mrs. Rovedino did not check herself or turn back, and seeing the accustomed, unhesitating way in which she laid her small hand on a particular decanter standing among others on a silver tray, he remembered and suddenly recognised the faint disturbing suggestion underlying her perfume which had struck him when she had first come up to him in the drawing-room and given him her hand. It was the smell of brandy.

"But you must have just a little one," she said, taking the stopper out of the decanter and pouring something into a glass. "What shall it be? Whisky and soda? Gin and lime? Brandy? We've got practically everything."

Charles hesitated, torn between the feeling that the very least he could do for his own dignity was to leave the house unrefreshed, and the desire to persuade Mrs. Rovedino to tell him more. Before he had made up his mind what answer to give she glanced over her shoulder questioningly, and smiled.

"We shan't be disturbed," she said, as though she fully understood his refusal and even theoretically approved of it, "nobody ever comes in here once dinner's cleared away. Besides," she added, turning back to the decanters, "I want most frightfully to talk to you about Eileen."

This decided him at once, making the risk of encountering Rovedino again seem quite unimportant.

"That's very kind of you," he said, going over to stand beside

her at the sideboard, "may I have a brandy and soda? I should like to ask you about Eileen, very much." He watched her deftly handling decanters and glasses, her small hands moving without hesitation and with the precision of daily familiarity among the ostentatious collection of bottles and siphons. She handed him his glass with the shadow of a conscious smile, took up her own, and moved back to the table, where she pulled out a chair and sat down. Charles did the same, and they faced one another with abashed self-consciousness, aware that the last few seconds had seen a surprising advance towards unexpected intimacy, and that they had somehow arrived at the point where they could sit down together like conspirators. Mrs. Rovedino looked at her glass consideringly, turning it slowly in her fingers on the polished table, and then, with a slight frown, raised it to her lips and drank carefully, her eyes closed and her throat gently moving, and set it down again with the sigh of someone experiencing a long-desired relief. Watching her with his own glass untouched on the table in front of him, Charles got the impression that she was performing, for the sake of propriety, an elaborate pantomime, and that the hesitation, the considering look, and the slow way of raising the glass as though she were in two minds about it, were all part of a technique of diverting attention from the fact that she was a practised drinker. He immediately lifted his own glass and tasted it, and with the temperate man's inability to believe that anyone could be so fond of brandy for its own sake, found himself wondering what inner conflict had brought this fastidious and delicate looking woman to the bottle.

Mrs. Rovedino drank again without speaking, and her face with its quivering muscle gradually relaxed. She touched her lips with her handkerchief and looked at him kindly.

"I'm sorry Eddie wouldn't help you," she said. "I'm afraid he must have been put against you at some time. He has rather strong prejudices."

"Yes, I expect so," said Charles, looking down at his glass. "I suppose that Eileen . . ."

"Oh, I don't think it was anything he heard from Eileen," said Mrs. Rovedino quickly, opening her eyes wide. "Eileen never mentions you—at least not willingly. She's extraordinarily reticent:

that's one of the things I admire her for, though I could never manage it myself."

"Then who . . ." said Charles, feeling that he already knew the answer. He moved his glass thoughtfully on the table, as though he were playing chess, and added, "I expect you mean Mrs. Gentry."

"Now, do forgive me if I seem impertinent," said Mrs. Rovedino. "I want to help you, really, and to do that I'm bound to talk as though I knew all about it."

"I expect you do. You saw a good deal of Sybil, didn't you, in California?"

Mrs. Rovedino made a face, and immediately looked penitent.

"Forgive me," she said again, "but I'm not very . . . very well-disposed towards your mother-in-law."

"Oh," said Charles, feeling a weight of apprehension lifted, "I thought, from something she said, that you were very friendly."

"Well, we were. I expect it was all my fault. She was terribly kind at first, and managed everything and really took charge of us completely. Almost too much, in a way, you know; it always leads to resentment. And then she's a very *magnetic* woman, don't you think? That sort always terrifies me."

"I understand your feeling, only too well," said Charles, glancing at his recollection of what Sybil had told him of Mrs. Rovedino as a pathetic wife confiding her anxieties about her husband. He wondered what was coming. Had Sybil cast her net into this ménage?

"Yes, I expect you've suffered from it too, in a different way," said Mrs. Rovedino. "She has an extraordinary knack of making you feel that she's an ally, and frightfully fond of one. And then, before you know where you are, you've told her all sorts of private things that you've never told anybody, and you find out too late that it's only a strange sort of curiosity on her part, and that she doesn't care how she uses it."

"That's exactly Sybil," said Charles, involuntarily smiling. "She even told me that you'd confided in her a good deal."

"Really? What did she say?"

Mrs. Rovedino took Charles's glass and her own and carried them to the sideboard, where she quietly replenished them. She

made no reference to this action, which was performed with a sleep-walking smoothness, and Charles realised that she would prefer it to pass without comment.

"She told me," he said, feeling his way warily, "that you had told her about Eileen. I got the impression that you hadn't seen her for a long time. Eileen, I mean."

"Why ever not?"

"Oh . . . I don't know. Wasn't there some . . . difficulty?"

"What do you mean, difficulty? Eileen comes to see us whenever she's in London. What was the difficulty supposed to be?"

"Oh . . . I hardly remember," said Charles, beginning to retreat. "I think she had an idea that Eileen had had a child by someone, and I suppose she thought that you might disapprove, or perhaps . . ." He broke off, and took a drink to cover his embarrassment.

"What ridiculous nonsense!" said Mrs. Rovedino, with a flash of spirit. "She must have known it wasn't true, and even if it were, surely she must have known that I would be the last person . . ." She paused and looked at him intently, her eyes very bright. "Who did she say was the father of the child?" she said quietly.

"I really forget," said Charles; "it was inexcusable of me to . . ."

"No, please don't be embarrassed and well-bred about it. If we're going to discuss this at all we'd much better be perfectly candid."

Charles looked at her hesitantly, but beyond the fact that he saw no anger or hostility against himself was unable to interpret her expression. She was sitting very still and upright on her chair, her eyes fixed on him with a curious unwavering intensity.

"Since you really seem to want the truth," said Charles gently, "she told me that your husband was the father of Eileen's child, and that the whole thing was a rather unhappy story. I shouldn't have given you the pain of hearing this, I know, but I can't be strong-minded when I want to know the truth so much myself." He paused, and seeing the handkerchief go up once more to the trembling cheek, added penitently, "I was even indelicate enough to ask your husband."

"And what did he say?"

"He laughed."

Mrs. Rovedino took the handkerchief away from her face and rested her hands on the table, plucking at the lace border with her curved nails. Her face had a puzzled and rather sad expression, but she seemed not particularly surprised and certainly not angry.

"Oh well," she said, "I suppose that's really the best way to treat such stories. Though it's the kind of thing you can be prosecuted for, isn't it? It amazes me that people of Sybil Gentry's type never get caught for slander."

"I knew it wasn't true," said Charles, feeling immense relief; and hungering for more.

Mrs. Rovedino continued to give frowning attention to her handkerchief, then crumpled it up in one hand and hid it in her lap.

"Shall I tell you the whole story?" she said. "It's one of those diabolical things that have just the beginnings of truth in them, so that one's denials don't carry the same conviction as the lie. People always prefer to believe the sensational version."

"Please tell me," said Charles, leaning forward with his elbows on the table.

"Yes, well, I will, because it partly concerns you, I suppose. Otherwise there'd be no excuse for my discussing it with a stranger, because it's not the sort of . . . Oh well, if I'm going to tell it to you at all you'd better hear the whole of it."

She lifted her eyes to his, and in them he saw a shamefaced appeal for sympathy, the guilty look of a woman about to commit a longed-for indiscretion which at the moment she is able to justify by an altruistic motive.

"Well, we first met Eileen a long time ago, you know. I think it was fairly soon after . . . at least, she was still in love with you, and very unhappy."

Still, thought Charles. And it was a long time ago. Is she implying that now . . . ?

He bent his head and compressed his lips attentively.

"We didn't know about it at the time. My husband came across her somehow in the theatre, and was very much attracted. He's a rather . . . rather a susceptible man," said Mrs. Rovedino, meeting Charles's eyes with embarrassment but also with a look of curiosity, as though she were anxious to see his reaction to this

statement, and to know whether she might encourage herself to talk about it. Charles nodded in an understanding way, and she dropped her eyes again, apparently satisfied. "And Eileen's a wonderfully attractive person: she has one of those rare faces. . . . I suppose a lot of people wouldn't see it immediately, but the better you know it, the more beautiful it becomes." She glanced up at Charles with a faint smile for confirmation, and then went on. "Anyhow, Eddie was frightfully struck with her from the first, really in love for a time in his queer way, and I knew at once that he was trying to have an affair with her."

Mrs. Rovedino put her handkerchief up to her cheek again and took another drink.

"I don't know whether he succeeded," she said, setting down her glass and sighing. "He never tells me anything, and he resents it frightfully if I try to find out anything; though really he ought to know that I don't mind so much; not after all these years.

"Well, anyhow, he saw a lot of her, and she came to the house, and he helped her to get one or two small parts in London, and was very secretive about it all and very much taken up with her. And then," said Mrs. Rovedino, fingering her pearls and looking modestly pleased, "one of those things happened which outsiders never seem able to understand, but which really, in the circumstances, was perfectly natural. From being rather jealous and wretched about it, I got to know Eileen very well myself, and liked her tremendously. She got to like me too, even better than Eddie. We became great friends."

She looked at Charles and smiled, evidently pleased with her own part in the story and hoping for some encouragement to dwell on this aspect of it.

"I'm a rather lonely person," she went on, looking thoughtfully at her beautiful curved finger-nails and resting her elbows on the table for the greater convenience of examining them, "and Eileen made an extraordinary difference to my life. You know, she's very reserved in some ways, but at the same time she's such delightful company; she's never too tired to talk, and she has such a wonderfully *seeing* way of looking at things—do you know what I mean? She makes you *see* things—even the most trivial detail—as if you'd never looked at it before, simply because her own perceptions are

so acute, and because her imagination's always awake. It's puzzling, isn't it, that she's never been more successful on the stage? She has all the imagination and understanding, but she lacks something that's very necessary for an actress. She lacks *drive*. She'll suddenly sit back idly as a spectator, just at the moment when she ought to be pushing her hardest. And the more you try to egg her on, the worse she gets. It's a great pity. Eddie always says her talents are the sort that only really flower in private life; I think perhaps he's right."

"I'm sure he is," said Charles warmly, unable to prevent himself from smiling foolishly with pleasure.

"You're still in love with her, aren't you?" said Mrs. Rovedino, after a pause, giving him a long look.

"I . . . don't really know," said Charles, the smile fading from his face. "I certainly would like to see her again, but of course I don't suppose . . ." He was afraid to ask, and left the sentence unfinished. "Do go on," he said. His face had become unusually grave.

"Well, anyhow, she was very much in love with *you*," said Mrs. Rovedino, watching him curiously. "It must have been more than a year before she told me anything about it. I knew there was *something*, because I could see that her relations with Eddie—whatever they were at that time, I've never been certain—were so unsatisfactory, at last for him; she was always very fond of him, and still is, but it was quite different. And when she told me about you, she cried—even after all that time. I could see she was still suffering."

Charles rubbed his hand across his eyebrows and shook his head, but could find nothing to say. He wanted somehow to express pity and remorse, but he was confused by the feeling of shameless joy which her words gave him, and by the fear that she would soon say something equally definite to dispel it; so he said nothing.

"I don't know how long it was after that," Mrs. Rovedino went on, averting her eyes and pretending to take a great interest in her bracelet, "that we realised she was ill. She was always thin, you know, so at first we didn't notice anything; and she always seemed to get tired very easily, as long ago as I can remember. Eddie used to tease her about being lazy; he said she was idle and unreliable, and that was why she never got any good parts, in spite of her

flashes of talent. I used to nag her, too, about never eating anything; I thought it was some silly dieting nonsense and that she was afraid of getting fat, which used to annoy me because she was getting so thin that her looks were going off, quite noticeably. But she always had a good colour, and we never put two and two together until one day when she and I went up to the top of the house to try on some old bonnets and furs that had belonged to my mother—you remember how she adored dressing up, when it was only for fun?—and she got so out of breath that she just sat down on the top of the stairs and couldn't speak, and when I touched her I found that she was wet through with perspiration. Of course," she said, meeting Charles's eyes again now that he had recovered from his confusion and was staring at her in fascination, "of course, never having had tuberculosis in the family, and not being familiar with the symptoms, I didn't even then, know what was the matter. But we made her go to a doctor, and he had her X-rayed, and then of course we knew."

"How bad was it?" said Charles, not liking the sound of his own voice. He cleared his throat quickly.

"Well, luckily, it hadn't gone so very far. There was a patch at the top of the left lung, and as soon as she knew this she realised the meaning of a lot of symptoms that had been bothering her and which she'd tried to ignore, because taken separately they didn't seem to be important—loss of weight, and never being hungry, and these dreadful sweats after the least exertion, especially at night. There'd been no hemorrhage, you see, not even any cough to speak of, so there was nothing to alarm a person who didn't know about it."

"I see," said Charles, breathing heavily.

"Well, the problem was, of course, that she had to go straight off to a sanatorium, and she had no money, and was terribly frightened of her aunt getting to know. I think that was rather silly of her myself, but she was awfully obstinate about it—the aunt, I mean, not the money so much—and seemed to think that she'd be well again in a few weeks and there was no point in causing a lot of anxiety. The money was no problem, really, because Eddie was only too glad, and she was sensible enough to see that it would have been unkind, as well as idiotic, not to let him do it."

"I see," said Charles again, threading his fingers together and frowning at them.

"So now you understand," said Mrs. Rovedino, lifting her head with an expression of triumph and colouring faintly, "the basis of Mrs. Gentry's interpretation. Eileen did go away to the country for six months, and Eddie certainly did look after her financially. But that was the reason for it."

"I'm only so glad," said Charles after a pause, meeting her eyes gratefully, "that she had . . . such friends. I feel that I ought to have been . . . that if only I'd known . . ."

"Well, you couldn't, of course. Why should you? It would never have occurred to any of us. I should never have told Mrs. Gentry anything about it, except . . ." She broke off, and looked confused. "You must remember," she said apologetically, fixing anxious eyes on his face and pressing her hands together in her lap, "that although I knew about you from Eileen, I didn't know who you were, and I certainly had no idea that you were connected with these people that Eddie met through business in California. And then again, as you know, Sybil Gentry has an awfully confidential way with her, and I was rather unhappy at the time about something else, which she knew about, and which I've since thought she was largely responsible for."

Mrs. Rovedino hastily picked up her glass and drank what was left of her brandy, then got up and went to the sideboard with the same trance-like smoothness as before, not even glancing at Charles's untouched glass, as though intent on avoiding any superfluous look or movement which might call critical attention to what she was doing. She brought back another drink, sat down without looking at him, and carefully went through the pantomime of turning the glass deliberately in her fingers, looking at it with a detached and absent expression, lifting it slowly as though she were thinking of something else, and swallowing half the tumblerful at a draught.

"She had a friend there all the time," she said, "a young married woman, American, very pretty. Eddie was struck at once, in his usual way, and started paying this girl a lot of attention. I ought to be used to it by now, I suppose, but it always upsets me at first; and Sybil saw in a flash what was going on, and spoke to me about

it. I thought, fool that I was, that she was on my side, because I'd really got far too intimate with her in a short time, and I discussed it with her quite frankly. You know how it is when one starts discussing a grievance . . . and she's a marvellous listener. Well, I went on, like a fool, and told her about a few of Eddie's previous passions, and what a lot I'd had to put up with. I told her about Eileen, too—not that I minded a scrap by then, because the relationship had become so different, and Eileen was more my friend than his; but just as an illustration—and I mentioned her name in passing because of course it never entered my *head* . . .” She looked at Charles with an anxious expression, slightly frowning. “That's what men don't like about women, isn't it?” she said. “That kind of indiscretion. A man would have said ‘a girl’ or ‘a woman,’ and left it at that. You'd never catch Eddie mentioning anybody's name.”

Charles smiled.

“I think men have a rather undeserved reputation for honourable discretion,” he said. “Some of them take a positive delight in mentioning names, even of women they've never had anything to do with.”

“Do they?” said Mrs. Rovedino, looking genuinely surprised. “How horrid. I always thought . . . Well, anyway, I *did* mention Eileen's, and of course Sybil was all attention in a moment and asked me a lot of questions; and then she said, ‘It's the same girl that my daughter's husband was in love with.’ She didn't go into details, and I didn't like to ask, but I realised that the Charles she spoke of must be the same as Eileen's, and I could have bitten my tongue out.”

Charles shook his head and smiled, dwelling for a moment in secret pleasure on the expression ‘Eileen's Charles.’ Just a way of putting it, of course, but all the same . . . there was something heartwarming in the surprising thought that he had been discussed and remembered in that character.

“I don't think you did any harm,” he said consolingly. “You couldn't know; no-one had bound you to secrecy.”

“I hope I didn't,” said Mrs. Rovedino, sighing, “but I'm afraid I gave Sybil Gentry the foundations of her poisonous story. I wonder how many people she's told it to? And what could be her

motive? D'you think she really got muddled after all this time, or d'you think she did it on purpose?"

"It's possible that she forgot, but knowing Sybil, I'd say it was far more likely that she did it deliberately."

"Yes, but what could have been her object? It's such a damaging lie. It's the sort of thing that could easily get her into trouble."

"No, not really. I don't suppose she's told it to anyone but me, and she'd never dream that I should ever meet you and repeat it."

"But why should she tell it to *you*?" said Mrs. Rovedino fretfully, "she must have known that it would be unpleasant for you, and it was certainly most maliciously unfair to Eddie."

"I think," said Charles slowly, "that her motive would be strategic rather than malicious. She's a great campaigner, Sybil; it's the breath of life to her."

"But what would she be campaigning about, after all this time?"

Charles shrugged his shoulders and sighed, looking down at his full glass and moving it thoughtfully. Was it wise to say anything more to this charming woman, who drank so much and opened her heart to strangers? But of course she already guessed what he had come for; and she was no friend of Sybil's; and there was more, much more about Eileen that she could tell him.

"I think," he said, "that she wanted to find out . . . whether I still had any feeling for Eileen. It isn't her method to put a direct question; she prefers to administer poison and watch the result."

"I see," said Mrs. Rovedino, and suppressed a slight hiccup, which however did not alter her kindly expression. "And was it poison? I mean . . . what was the result? Did you mind very much?"

"Yes, very much."

"But why? You can't have seen her now for a good many years."

"No, but that seems to make no difference. And I want to see her again. That's why I came to see you."

"I know," said Mrs. Rovedino. She folded her arms on the table and leaned on them, clasping her elbows, her eyes large and solemn and full of melancholy envy. "I do wish you'd tell me truthfully what it is you're up to."

"I should like to," said Charles quickly, mentally putting himself in her hands and looking at her beseechingly. "I'm trying to

find her, but you see I don't know . . . It wouldn't be any good my finding her unless I had some idea . . . I can hardly suppose that she has any feeling for me left after all this time, and the way things went before."

"And if she had," said Mrs. Rovedino, the pupils of whose eyes had grown strangely large, "what would you do?"

"I should ask her to come away with me . . . I think. If she still felt that we ought to be together. But it's ten years, and I suppose it isn't reasonable to imagine . . ."

"Does your wife know?"

"No," said Charles. "Oh, I know the whole thing's bad behaviour, from almost any standpoint. I don't attempt to justify it. I haven't any definite ideas, because it's all so uncertain. If I only had some clue to Eileen's feelings . . . but you do see, don't you, that it would be madness to raise all the uproar again, when I don't know anything?" Mrs. Rovedino made no reply, and he went on hastily. "Of course I know I'm behaving abominably. If it were anybody else, and I were told about it, I should say there was no excuse. My coming to see you, even, is terribly disreputable. I felt compelled to do it."

"Oh yes, I see completely. Everybody will condemn you. Some people, perhaps, would justify it in their hearts, and even envy you"—she gave him a quick apologetic glance which said much—"but nobody will say so. But of course you've thought of all that."

"I haven't thought of that side of it very clearly," said Charles. "I haven't got that far. Don't you see that I can't, until I've got more to go on? I'm completely in the dark."

A telephone bell rang somewhere in the house, and they heard a slow deliberate tread crossing the floor above. Mrs. Rovedino glanced at the ceiling and then at Charles, looking rather frightened.

"Look here," she said, "let's walk down to the Embankment. I often do, last thing; I take the dog. You go on, and I'll catch you up in a moment."

They were both guiltily alarmed by the sound of Rovedino moving about upstairs, and got up quickly from the table. Charles took his hat and umbrella and let himself out silently at the front door while Mrs. Rovedino disappeared through a door at the back

of the hall. Before he had strolled a hundred yards he heard the quick tap of her heels on the dry pavement, and turning saw her slight figure hurrying after him in the dusk. She had put on a little jacket and had a small weazened-looking cream-coloured Pekingese on a lead. She slackened her pace as she came up to him and they fell into step together, feeling more at ease now that their meeting, with its hint of furtiveness, was safely over and they were able to stroll with a conventional appearance of unconcern—a respectable couple taking the dog for an airing. Aware of the passers-by, however, and the nearness of the house, they exchanged only a few trivial remarks until they had reached the Embankment and had crossed to the other side, and were separated from Church Street by the shining expanse of road and the widely spaced rhythmic sweeping-past of traffic. Involuntarily, as one always does, they drew near to the parapet, and gazed for a time without speaking at the lights on the river. Mrs. Rovedino's forehead was contracted in a sharp frown, as though she were thinking deeply, but whether of his affairs or of some unspoken confidence of her own Charles was unable to guess, though he glanced at her once or twice, searching for the appropriate word to reopen the conversation. The Pekingese stood behind her with feet squarely planted, in an attitude of resignation, and at last she sighed and turned away from the river and they walked on.

"Yes, it's a great, great problem," she said, evidently following her own train of thought, "and nobody but the people involved can balance the right and wrong. And even they . . ." She broke off and looked at him with a half guilty, half wistful expression. "Why, even I, years ago . . . would you believe that I once nearly ran away from Eddie? Although he's so kind and remarkable in many ways . . . but one passes through certain dangerous stages, and I actually had my bag packed and the letter written! But in the end I just unpacked it again. I'm an indeterminate character, I'm afraid—or perhaps I should be glad of it. I often wonder what my life would be like by now, if I'd carried it through."

"Are you glad you didn't?" said Charles, who was longing to return to the subject of Eileen but felt bound to make some return of sympathetic interest.

"Yes, I suppose so, in a way. My life's not bad, and I should make

a miserable failure of living alone. You see, the funny thing was, there was nobody else. It wasn't the same problem as yours, exactly; it was just . . . oh, I dare say if there'd been anybody else I should have gone. But it hasn't turned out at all badly, as lives go. I've nothing really to complain of."

"I think people very often go through those stages," said Charles, not knowing what else to say.

"Oh yes, of course they do. Only most of them get over it. I expect you'd get over it, too, if you really tried. Have you given it a chance?"

"For ten years," said Charles, stepping over the divisions of the pavement, conscious that this was an over-simple answer and therefore at some distance from the truth.

"And do you find," said Mrs. Rovedino, looking up at him with an expression of curiosity and envy, "do you find that you still want Eileen? After all this time?"

"Does that seem very strange?"

"Not strange, exactly. Unusual. People who've done without a thing for ten years generally lose the feeling. I can't tell you whether Eileen has or not."

"That's what I've wanted to ask you, all along," said Charles, giving her a sidelong look.

"I know. I'd tell you if I knew, but I really have no idea. You'll have to chance it."

"Is that your honest advice?"

"Advice? No!" said Mrs. Rovedino, looking startled. "Obviously I can't advise you at all. I can sympathise a little, perhaps, but that's quite different. Though I'm very fond of Eileen; I should like her to have the chance—that is, if she wanted it. . . ." She broke off, and looked troubled. "Of course I don't know anything about your married life; if I did, I might think differently. I ought to dissuade you, I suppose. Wouldn't it make your wife very unhappy?"

"Yes, I'm afraid it would."

"And doesn't that worry you at all?"

"It does, very much."

"But not enough to stop you?"

"At moments, yes. But on the other hand, I don't make her very

happy as it is, and my chances of doing so are growing steadily less." He fell silent, feeling disgust at the element of hypocrisy which had crept into his speech, but at the same time knowing he was powerless to correct it. There are some things, he thought, which one can't say, even to a stranger. Impossible to state bluntly that I no longer love Isabella, and that for both our sakes I hope she no longer loves me . . . that on her side it's just possessiveness, and that therefore . . . Obviously the desire to justify one's actions goes very deep.

He became depressed.

"At my age," said Mrs. Rovedino unexpectedly in a clear detached little voice, defying polite protest, "at my age one no longer believes very much in personal happiness. But it may exist in a few isolated cases, and that being so, if I were you—though I'm not advising you, remember, and it's none of my business—if I were you I think I should explore the ground. I don't know exactly where Eileen is, but I think you could find her if you really wanted to."

She looked at Charles solemnly, but with a sparkle of animation, and he perceived at once that she meant to give him a clue.

"I do want to," he said, keeping his eyes on her face.

"Well then," said Mrs. Rovedino, with the dramatic satisfaction of a fairy-tale character about to impose a set of impossible tasks, "I think, if you went to Dublin, you could hardly fail . . ."

"But I've just come back from there!" said Charles, standing still in dismay, "I was in Dublin three days ago!"

"I doubt if she was there three days ago," said Mrs. Rovedino, pausing while the Pekingese cynically lifted a leg against a tree, "but I think she is by now." She continued to gaze at him with her mysterious look of expectancy and importance. "I can't tell you more, except that she's with a small repertory company, and they're doing an Irish tour. I don't know the name of it, even, or where they're going, or how long she'll be away; but I fancy you could pick up a clue in Dublin, if you went at once. There can't be so many of them."

"No," said Charles. "No, I imagine not."

His thoughts stood still, refusing to suggest either pleasure or disappointment, and he glanced across at the river with an absent

expression. Mrs. Rovedino consulted his face in silence and then turned, giving the dog's lead a gentle pull, and they began to walk slowly back in the direction of Church Street. Looking about him, and at the few people who passed them at a purposeful pace, intent on reaching legitimate destinations, he wondered for a moment why everything suddenly appeared so flat and dull. There seemed no object in being there any more; this walk with Mrs. Rovedino, which until a moment ago had seemed so important and full of possibilities, had suddenly lost interest, and he was conscious of a vague impatience to bring it to an end. They walked on a little way in uneasy silence, and presently Charles discovered that the change which had taken place in him was due to the knowledge that Eileen was not in London. Until that doubt had become a certainty, his watchfulness had been unconsciously at work, glancing at passing cars, noting each female figure as it approached, even greeting with a quickening of interest every crawling taxi which drew solicitously near them along the kerb. Ridiculous, no doubt; but as long as he believed her to be in London there was always a chance. . . . He smiled wryly to himself to think that for the last few days he had been unconsciously buoyed up by the hope of somewhere meeting her in the street.

Now that he had recognized the cause of his momentary disappointment, his thoughts moved on again, flying to Sybil and Isabella at Oxenwood, and the space of time that was left before they would come home. These family weekends were usually long ones; they would not return until Tuesday evening, and this was only Sunday night. Busy with calculations for a possible journey, he became aware that Mrs. Rovedino was walking beside him in evident dejection, her face averted, pretending to take an interest in a solitary seagull which was standing in silhouette on the stone parapet and which sailed smoothly away at their approach. He remembered his debt of gratitude, and felt ashamed that he should have let her think that her help had been received with coldness, or that his silence meant indifference. He bent his head enquiringly to look at her face, and was shocked to see tears brimming her lower eyelids. The thought shot disobligingly across his mind . . . drunk? But even if she were, she was no less kind; and her chagrin, whatever its cause, no less actual. He felt a sudden tender-

ness for her, a desire to understand her unhappiness and assure her of his gratitude and support. He slipped a hand under her elbow and adjusted his steps to hers, walking beside her in silence and with bent head, like an old friend. Presently she looked up at him and smiled, her face expressing apology for her foolishness and at the same time a childish desire for encouragement and reward.

"I'm so grateful to you," said Charles quietly, feeling the gentle pressure of her elbow and being glad of its friendliness, "you've been so kind, so extraordinarily kind . . . I should like to do something for you in return?"

"Oh, it's nothing," she said, looking pleased; "I don't suppose I've been any help at all." She glanced up at him with a surprisingly mischievous expression. "On the contrary, I may have started a lot of trouble. What do you think?"

"It's possible. But it's the sort of trouble I want. You've given me what I came for."

This assurance seemed to please her out of all proportion. She sighed contentedly, and the smile lingered on her face a long time, as though what he had said had given her infinite satisfaction. Was it possible, he wondered, that her pleasure in taking part in a stranger's affairs had its origin in the same thirst for influence that prompted Sybil's mischievous interferences—even though the fruit of the one was malice and of the other benevolence? Was it the same thing working diversely through opposite natures? But then, he reminded himself, though he was a stranger to her, Eileen was not; and she seemed to have a genuine fondness for Eileen and to desire her happiness, and the happiness of lovers in general; as though what she could not enjoy herself she was still anxious to bestow on others—an aim that had never, surely, occurred to Sybil. Convinced of her kindness, he yielded to a renewed desire to talk about Eileen, and finding Mrs. Rovedino friendly and warm and equally disposed to be talkative, strolled with her far beyond Church Street in happy agreement, saying goodbye to her finally at the corner a few minutes before midnight. He stood and looked after her as she tapped away up the empty street with her little dog, and when she disappeared with a wave of her hand felt his spirits rise with a new and confident excitement.

The following evening, having sent off a telegram to Isabella

announcing without explanation that he had decided to go back to Ireland for a further week's holiday, and without giving Miss Doddington time to collect her wits and ask for a forwarding address, he left the house and started his journey to Dublin.

6. The first thing that Charles noticed about Dublin, about the streets he drove through from the station and the people he saw in the entrance hall of the Shelbourne Hotel, was that they were all alive with that trembling air of expectancy which had so suddenly vanished from London the night before last. In the taxi he was unable to sit otherwise than on the edge of the seat, leaning forward with elbows on knees and hands clasped, staring through the window in order to get a glimpse of every possible crossing and street corner. He knew that this was foolish, and that even though Eileen might at that moment be within half a mile of him, it was unreasonable to expect her to be walking these drab neighbourhoods at that early hour; nevertheless his childish excitement was too exuberant to be resisted, and he saw no advantage in pretending to himself that he was calm. In the same way he grudged the few moments spent at the reception desk, in signing the register, and accompanying his luggage to a bedroom, in his anxiety lest during that fatal absence of attention she should have stepped out of the lift and disappeared through the revolving doors into the street. Nothing, he knew, would appease and satisfy him so well as to leave the hotel at once and walk rapidly off to examine all the streets in which there were theatres; but he admitted the futility of any such plan, and told himself that the only sensible beginning was to have some breakfast. He accordingly went down to the dining-room, in spite of an impatient feeling that he was wasting time, and chose a table with a clear view of the door. Then, re-

luctantly deciding that he must allow some time to pass before he could begin to make any fruitful enquiries, and that in any case he must get a grip on himself and settle on a plan of action, he ordered kidneys and bacon, coffee, toast, marmalade, and a copy of the *Irish Times*.

During the meal, which he managed with the greatest difficulty to make last for half an hour, the first excitement of arrival began to subside, and he asked himself what was the best method of finding a hidden person in an unknown city—even supposing that she were really there, and not in some other town, or in the middle of a journey. Obviously the first step was to comb the theatres, and he turned to the advertisement columns of the paper before he had tasted his coffee: but these, beyond giving the names of the plays running at three Dublin theatres, told him nothing. However, he had hardly expected that they would, and he was not discouraged. He began to wish that instead of holding imaginary conversations with Eileen and composing imaginary letters to Isabella during the wakeful hours of the journey, he had decided clearly what he would do when he arrived; but at the time it had seemed impossible; he had been unable to fix his mind on it for any length of time, and had put off every attempt with the same formula—"I shall see when I get there."

Now that he was actually in Dublin, smoking his third cigarette over the ruins of his breakfast, uneasily examining the people at the other tables and glancing up involuntarily every time the door opened, he was dismayed to realise that he had not the faintest notion how to set about his search. Eventually, having ordered some more coffee and drunk it deliberately, he remembered the chief source of miscellaneous information in every big hotel, and having folded his newspaper and signed the bill, went out of the dining-room in search of the hall porter.

To his surprise, the porter remembered him, and after a moment's professional concentration addressed him confidently by name. This was evidently intended to be flattering, but it disconcerted Charles, who stammered and involuntarily spoke in a severe tone when he asked for details of the plays which were running in Dublin. The porter showed him a printed sheet, which, beyond giving the names of the principal players, told him no more than

the newspaper had done. He put on his spectacles and studied the bill in silence, not knowing what to say next. He felt that it would be unsafe, as well as useless, to mention Eileen by name, so he asked instead if he could see a programme from any of the theatres which would give the entire cast. This the porter was unable to provide, but he had himself seen the musical play at the Gaiety, and obliged Charles with a lengthy description of it.

"What class of entertainment do you prefer, sir?" he said at last, seeing that the gentleman was still unsatisfied and continued to stare at the handbill with a worried air.

"I've no particular preference," said Charles, feeling that a little eccentricity was the best way out of the difficulty, "but I like to know all the names before I go to see a play."

"Perhaps you could get some information in the bar, sir," said the porter, looking rather hurt, "I believe the young ladies there are well acquainted with the theatres."

"Oh. Will the bar be open now?"

"Hardly, sir. In just over half an hour. But the young ladies may be there themselves already."

But the barmaids, though they evidently took a professional pride in being able to give advice on all the theatres and cinemas in town, were no better able than the hall porter to tell him what he wished to know, and as he saw from the glances they exchanged that his hesitation was beginning to appear positively lunatic, he thanked them, drank a glass of stout to establish his normality, and pretended to decide on a gangster picture. He felt that they were barely managing, out of politeness, to smother their laughter, and as soon as he decently could he left the bar.

Evidently the best course was to visit the theatres themselves, and this he set out to do, though without hope, for he now felt certain that Eileen was not in Dublin. Only one of the three plays running, the musical one, was new; she was not likely to be in that, and it was hardly possible that she could be in either of the others since she had been so recently in London. A repertory company on an Irish tour would be playing the smaller towns, and how to get information on this point Charles could not imagine. However, because it was necessary to do something, and because there was always the possibility of stumbling on a clue, he spent the morn-

ing in visiting the three theatres, studying the playbills and framed photographs hanging outside and in the foyer, and the programme which in each case he asked for at the box office.

"The trouble is," he said to the girl in the box office at the Gaiety, "that I may be leaving Dublin tonight, and visiting a few other towns. Is there anyone who could tell me what's on in . . . in Cork, for instance?"

"You'd see it in the paper," she said, her eyes wandering curiously over his face.

"But the paper wouldn't give a list of the cast, I suppose?"

"It would not."

"Well, there, you see . . . it's the touring companies I'd like to find out about, so that whichever town I happened to be in . . . I'm not certain, you see, where I shall be going next."

The girl continued to gaze at him in a puzzled way, evidently trying to imagine what his line of business was, and what it was he wanted.

"You could try The Grapes," she said. "A lot of theatrical people go in there at lunch time, and the commercials use it as well. Do you not know it?"

Seeing that he did not, she directed him to a public house not far away, and Charles walked off with a slight renewal of confidence, relieved that the next step—however fruitless it might prove—had at least been indicated, and that there was no need, yet, to go back to the hotel and try and think of a fresh line of research.

The public bar at The Grapes was dark, crowded, friendly and very hot. It was full of men, but there were also one or two women with eye-veils and black patent-leather handbags sitting at small tables sipping Guinness. It had the unmistakable air of a neighbourhood rendezvous, where everybody knew everybody else, and Charles, edging his way slowly towards the bar, felt himself immediately remarked as a stranger and a foreigner.

Behind the bar, standing statuesquely against the mirrors and bottles, was a splendid barmaid of the type he had not seen since the last war—tall, impassive, big-bosomed, with blonde hair elaborately dressed in tiers of sausages on top of her head. She was busy, manipulating the beer-pulls, handing out and taking back

glasses, wiping the bar, replenishing the basket of biscuits from under the counter and noisily ringing change from the cash register, but doing everything with a splendid rhythmic activity of the arms, scarcely moving her body at all, and without relaxing her part in the conversation. When Charles reached the bar she raised her eyebrows and made a little questioning movement with her head, at the same time sweeping away some used glasses in the direction of a boy who was occupied under the bar at a sink with running water.

"A Guinness, please," said Charles, putting his foot on the rail to steady himself against the pressure of shoulders. The barmaid drew the stout and set the glass in front of him with a slight nod, evidently not prepared to pay him much attention.

"It's my opinion he'll never try it," she said to the man next to him.

"And why not?" said the man, leaning heavily against Charles's arm and looking up at him. "It's the greatest military machine the world has ever known. What is there in Poland that would stop him?"

"If he goes into Poland," said the barmaid, "maybe that will be the end of it. There's no-one who'd be wanting war."

"Don't you believe it," said the man, giving Charles a nudge and showing a row of grey teeth when he smiled, "there's lot's of boys would be on the pig's back if there was a war. They'd be fighting to get to it."

"I don't know any boys like that," said the barmaid disdainfully, clasping a shapely hand round a beer-pull and looking down at it.

"Maybe you don't know any boys at all," said the man, grinning, and again with an upward glance including Charles in the jest. "It's only the old fellows like us that Miss Dudeney knows. But don't be after worrying—we'll be staying right close beside you an' in Dublin too."

The barmaid smiled, but only very faintly and without pleasure, and she gave Charles a glance which expressed impatience with the conversation.

"And what do you think of the situation?" she said graciously. "Will there be a war?"

"It looks very much like it, I'm afraid."

"You're English, aren't you?" she said. "What are they saying about it over there? Will they really come into it, and France, and all on account o' them Poles?"

"They say so," said Charles. "I suppose we shall, if he actually goes into Poland. Everybody's hoping that it won't happen, but I suppose it will."

"And if he does, what business is it of anybody's?" said the barmaid crossly, picking up a shilling and suspending her hands over the keys of the cash register. "The stupid creatures!" she added, striking the keys angrily with her fingers and opening the drawer with a crash. She picked out the change rapidly and pushed it across the bar with one hand while she closed the drawer with the other, frowning as she did so.

"I wish you'd give me some advice," said Charles, taking advantage of the fact that the man beside him had turned away for a moment and was talking to somebody else. "Do you happen to know any of the theatrical touring companies?"

"How do you mean, know them?" said the barmaid, pouring out a double whisky for a fresh customer, and giving Charles only half her attention. "They mostly come in here, of course, when they're in town. I know a good many of them, but they're always changing."

"Do you happen to know Miss Eileen Oram?" he said, leaning towards her and dropping his voice, with the feeling that it was somehow indecorous to ask for Eileen by name, in a public bar.

"Can't say I know the name. Does she come in here?"

"I don't know. I shouldn't think so. I was only wondering."

"Is she a professional? What company is she in?"

"I don't know that either. She's in a company that's just starting an Irish tour. I just thought you might happen to know the name, or could tell me where to enquire. I've got some letters to give her," he added as an afterthought.

The barmaid smoothed her blouse and looked at him doubtfully, then left him while she served some more customers, took money and gave change, and sent the boy round the tables to collect glasses. People were beginning to drift away, and the bar was less crowded. Presently she came back, feeling her coiffure lightly with

experienced fingers, making sure that everything was in place.

"I don't know, I'm sure," she said. "Perhaps I should know the person if I saw her." The man with the grey teeth turned round to the bar again and she caught his eye, indicating Charles with a stately movement of the head. "This gentleman's asking after the touring companies," she said. "He's asking after a particular person, but doesn't know the name of the company. Would old Mr. Myers be able to help him, do you think?"

"And who is it you'd be wishing to see?" said the little man, thrusting back his mackintosh with a movement of the elbows and looking inquisitively at Charles. "There's few o' them class o' persons that I wouldn't be acquainted with."

"Oh, it's just a private matter," said Charles, recoiling from the idea of mentioning Eileen's name to the unsavoury ear which was tilted eagerly to hear it. "What I wanted, if possible, was to find out what touring companies are in Ireland at present, and the names of the people in them. If there were some central agency where I could enquire . . ."

"Old Mr. Myers might know," said the barmaid. "He follows all that sort of thing. He might tell you."

"Who is Mr. Myers?"

"He's just an old gentleman. English, like yourself. He's quite an old character of a man, you know. He comes in here every Saturday."

"Where could I find him today? Do you know his address?"

The barmaid shook her head, and turned to the little man, who was now absorbed in cleaning his nails with a match.

"Do *you* know, Mr. Costello?"

"I do not. He lives somewhere very handy to this, but I've never followed him home. He's a queer one."

"His wife comes in here most evenings, about half six or seven," said the barmaid; "if you came back again at that time you might see her."

"Thank you, I will," said Charles, "that's a very good idea." He paid for his drink and put down the money beside the empty glass, eager to be gone now that the next small link in the chain seemed to have been forged, and feeling an unreasonable desire to get away from the man in the mackintosh.

"But what might be the name you were asking for?" said the man, who had finished his nails, and now, with his mouth open in an absorbed grimace, had begun operations on one ear.

"Oh, it's not important," said Charles, "it doesn't matter." And exchanging a glance with the barmaid, in which he silently engaged her as an ally and asked for her discretion, he nodded vaguely to the company and went out.

He wandered slowly along Grafton Street, pausing to look in the shop windows as he went. There were five hours to be got through before seven o'clock. Supposing that he went back to The Grapes at six, so as to be sure of catching Mrs. Myers . . . that still left four hours, and he could think of nothing profitable to do. He had an uneasy feeling that he ought to return to the hotel, and presently did so, walking in with an appearance of briskness, examining the letterboard and asking if there were any messages for himself—futile gestures which obviously deceived nobody. He was not hungry, so he went and sat in a corner of the lounge where he could watch people coming and going beyond a plate-glass partition, and smoked several cigarettes. A small elderly foreign-looking waiter with a ragged moustache came and stood against a pillar and eyed him with dislike.

Time passed very slowly. Every few minutes, for the waiter's benefit, Charles withdrew his gaze from the glass partition and glanced anxiously at his watch, but the waiter's cynical expression remained unchanged, and Charles felt that he knew quite well that he was not expecting anybody. He found himself envying the certainty, the self-righteousness, the transparent honesty of the people coming and going through the hotel. He alone was finding it necessary to dissemble, he was the only one capable of being startled by hearing his own name. Other men came into the lounge because they really wanted coffee, or to read the paper; they recognised acquaintances without alarm, lingered at the bookstall because they actually thought of buying a paper or a packet of cigarettes, strolled through the public rooms in the firm confidence that they had every right to be there, and stepped over Charles's feet and glanced at him in passing, knowing at once that he was an impostor and a fraud, with no legitimate business and no known destination. Sitting there in the lounge, in the midst of

this coming and going and babble of talk, his spectacles his only screen and protection, Charles was struck by that feeling of strangeness which had often descended in moments of heightened perception, even in boyhood, making the immediate world as mysteriously unfamiliar as a stage scene suddenly bathed in greenish light and turned from a summer woodland into a mermaid's cavern. As the light changed colour in his mind for that involuntary transformation, the scene he moved in—whether the Pillows' studio by the open window on a summer night, or his own dining-room with the mild candlelight making constellations of coloured sparks among Sybil's bracelets, or now the unrestful lounge of this Dublin hotel—became as portentous and as strange as a scene shown moving and small in a magic mirror, concerning himself but depicting a time and circumstances unknown, meaningless without interpretation.

What am I doing in this uncongenial place, sitting in a public lounge waiting for the hours to pass? Waiting for the moment when I can go to a public house in a strange street and meet an old woman I never saw before. . . . And the reason, the reason—if only it could be related to these tedious suspended hours, which is impossible—is that somewhere, in some small town which I have never seen, Eileen is going about her afternoon affairs, unconscious, absorbed, never giving a thought to me. . . . How can I account for my sitting here in this alien place, bearing this insufferable tedium? With what is it connected?

He coughed and shifted his feet as his vision cleared, at a loss (as always when the unheralded sensation passed) to explain his momentary astonishment at everything around him. The disturbing flicker of abnormality had vanished, and he was conscious only of weariness at the slow passing of time, and a cold annoyance at the cynical expression of the waiter. Presently, when the lounge had become so familiar to him that he found himself gazing across it with the confidence of an habitu  , and even able to detect uncertainty in strangers, he picked up his hat and gloves with a feeling of release and went out to find a cinema.

The bar of The Grapes at six o'clock was no longer hostile because it was no longer strange. How absurd, thought Charles, letting the door swing behind him and blinking at the lights and

mirrors—if I came in here every day for a week I should begin to feel happy in it; I should know it, it would become a part of me; I should come in and out automatically, knowing without thinking where to put my feet and where to lean my elbow. The strangeness of the visible world would be left outside; it would be one of the places where I experience confidence.

And yet there is nothing in this public bar, he thought, that one can like; nothing sympathetic about it. The change when it came about, would be due only to the odd potency of familiarity, which could give the courage of home to a street corner if I sufficiently frequented it. I should be happy here from the moment when I had a share in it, and every other part—the engraved mirrors, the fluted glass shades on the electric lights, the mahogany screen dividing one from the private bar—knitted themselves together to buttress me against a newcomer.

Moving to the bar, and accepting gladly the barmaid's severe nod of recognition as she looked up from polishing glasses, Charles found himself envying, with a sense of illumination, those fortunate ones who live their lives in the place where they were born. They would never have had to emerge from the delicate but resistant shell of first surroundings, nor ever take on the shape of this milieu and then of that, discarding the supports best known to eye and heart as they left boyhood and youth. They remained for ever in great sureness on known territory, moving always with a sense of protective colouring amounting almost to invisibility—a sensation he had never known anywhere save in his grandmother's house. He had been able, often, to come down the back stairs from his own room and along the stone passage and out into the still, hot, dazzling cobbled yard at the back without any consciousness at all of his bodily existence, so absorbed was he in his own thoughts and intentions, so fondly protected by the familiar shape and colour of every stair and stone; so that afterwards, when he went through the stone archway to the kitchen garden, or turned left to the harness room and remembered what he had come for, there was no trace left in his mind of how he had got there—no recollection of coming down three flights of stairs in fancy leaps, or the squeak of the handrail under his hot palm, or the smell of the cold flags as he came past the dairy and went out into the yard;

nothing but a sense of having passed once more in happy self-forgetfulness through a familiar element, like a trout conscious of the dappled stones as it crosses a sunny pool. Of the self-consciousness of adult, uprooted life, always with apprehensive tentacles expanding and contracting, exploring each strange area with shrinking distaste, there was nothing—nothing. It was a freedom lost for ever and only now remembered against a background of the happy house in Wales.

"Scotch and soda, please," said Charles, pushing his hat to the back of his head and taking out his cigarette case. He rested one buttock on a high stool and took his lighter by two fingers out of his waistcoat pocket, involuntarily performing those actions which would make him seem at home in the barmaid's eyes and in the eyes of the few other customers who were already there. But consciously he was not thinking of this at all, and still dwelt with pleasure on his memory of the yard enclosed by the house and stables, and the curious hot suspended silence which settled down on it like a spell in the middle of the morning.

If I went back there, he wondered, would it be the same? No, it would be different, because I am changed, and would always deliberately be seeking for the old sensation, instead of feeling it. (Then what, said a voice inside him, do you expect to find in Eileen after all these years? You will both be different, and you will watch in vain for a glimpse of what can never be repeated.)

"She hasn't come in yet," said the barmaid, wiping the bar and setting his glass before him; and added, seeing his startled look as he paused in the act of lighting his cigarette and held the flame aside so that he could see her, "old Mrs. Myers, I mean. But she won't be long."

"Oh yes . . . thank you," said Charles, recollecting himself. "There's no hurry."

He finished lighting his cigarette, settled himself more comfortably on the stool, and took a book from under his arm and laid it beside his glass. It was too big to go in his pocket, and seemed therefore likely to prove a nuisance; but the habit of carrying a book about, especially when travelling or away from home, was a deep-seated one, and he had been carrying and forgetting, losing and recovering this book ever since he had arrived in Dublin. He

had brought it with him to The Grapes as a protection against conversation during the period of waiting, but now, looking at its meek brown cover as it lay on the bar and seeing the barmaid's surprised sideways glance, he realised that to bring it there and plant it beside his glass had the appearance of a hostile act, and that so long as he sat on that stool, confronting the mirrors, bottles, beer-pulls, curls and bosom, there would be no possibility of reading it. It was a gesture which as a younger man he might perhaps have insisted on, and enjoyed, but now he felt himself committed to the barmaid, and was incapable of doing anything so likely to affront her.

"What sort of a book is that?" she said, polishing away at a glass and tilting her head exaggeratedly to one side to indicate that she wished to read the title.

"It's a life of Tolstoy," said Charles, setting the book up on end with its back towards her, and as she bent her head to peer letting his eyes wander over the mystifying arrangement of her dry and hollow curls.

"Uh? Who's it by?"

"It's by Aylmer Maude."

"Would it be good?" said the barmaid, cocking her head conventionally to hear either one of the only known and possible replies—"You ought to read it," or "Can't say I think much of it myself."

"It's one of my favourite books," said Charles, and wondered why she gave him a suspicious, inquisitive look, screwing up her eyes, and moving away at once to serve another customer.

Presently, when there were a lot more people in the bar and she and the boy had been kept busy for some time, she came back, keeping her eyes on the door, and spoke in a confidential undertone.

"There she is," she said; "would you like me to introduce you?"

"Yes, please." He turned round quickly, not knowing what to expect, and saw a small sad-faced respectable elderly woman threading her way between shoulders and elbows with a willow-pattern jug. She reached the bar at some distance from Charles and gave her jug to the boy. The barmaid moved smoothly away to

intercept her, and in a few minutes Mrs. Myers appeared with an expression of timid resignation at Charles's elbow.

"This is the gentleman," said the barmaid, and spread her hands out on the bar and leaned on them, evidently cordially interested in what they might say to one another.

"Good-evening, sir," said Mrs. Myers in an unmistakable London voice, keeping her eyes on the jug which she was holding carefully in both hands; "is it right what this young lady says, that you wanted to see Mr. Myers?" She raised her eyes for a moment to his face, and then lowered them again.

"I should like to, very much," said Charles; "I'm trying to find out about a touring company, and it seems possible that your husband might know. . . ."

"Oh, if it's anything theatrical," said Mrs. Myers with a sigh, "'e's sure to know all about it. Would you like to come along and see 'im now, sir? 'E's not expecting visitors, but I dare say 'e'll be quite pleased to see you."

"That's very kind of you," said Charles; "I'd like to go along with you, if I may." He pushed some money across the bar and picked up his book, meeting the barmaid's questioning eye as he did so. "Thank you, Miss Dudeney," he said, having suddenly with a happy effort remembered her name. She swept up the coins with a smile of majestic amusement, and turned away.

He followed Mrs. Myers to the door and held it open for her.

"I hope you'll excuse the jug," she said, when they were in the street, "I generally always fetch it for Mr. Myers, this time in the evening." She seemed painfully aware that it was an improper thing to be carrying in her present company.

"Of course," said Charles, falling into slow step beside her. "Do let me carry it for you?"

"Oh no, sir, thank you, it's not 'eavy. I don't know what Mr. Myers would say, either." She walked on a little way in silence and then suddenly stopped, as though she had remembered something. "Excuse me asking," she said doubtfully, "but do you drink beer yourself?"

"Not often," said Charles, "why?"

"I was just wondering if I ought to ha' brought back a double measure. Mr. Myers will want to offer you something, I dare

say, and if I 'aven't thought of that I shall get into trouble."

"Oh no, I've done my drinking for the day," said Charles, smiling down at the dubious and depressing face, "so please don't think about it."

They walked on again.

"Mr. Myers is so particular," she said, a resentful tone beginning to emerge in her voice. "'E's always on at me; if it isn't one thing it's another; but I can't think of everything."

"Well, nobody can," said Charles, not knowing what else to say. He looked down at her out of the corner of his eye, dwelling curiously on the tidy coat, the basin-shaped hat, the air of patient but injured respectability, and casting about for some channel of conversation. "Your husband's a great expert on the theatre, I believe? Or perhaps you both are?"

"Oh, I'm not," said Mrs. Myers in an aggrieved tone, "I'm only the cook and 'ousekeeper. Mr. Myers doesn't share any of 'is interests with *me*. I'm not allowed to touch so much as a book, not even to dust. 'E says I'm not capable of understanding them."

"But I'm sure you are."

"Well, I should have thought so," said Mrs. Myers, brightening up a little. "After all, there isn't so much *in* it, is there? And you can't keep the place clean if you mustn't move anything. But 'e's always got it against me what I was before I was married. I'm never allowed to forget it." She looked up at Charles timidly, but with a touch of defiance, steadying her jug, and the wildest thoughts flashed incredulously through his mind.

"I was a servant," she said, dropping her voice and searching his face anxiously.

Charles nodded encouragingly and fixed his eyes on the jug, hoping to suggest that it was in danger of spilling.

"Well, well," he said; and was instantly aware that this was the wrong answer. Yet what on earth was one to say, to a woman who made the revelation in that lugubrious, even threatening tone? "Never mind"? Or "How nice, I've always wanted to be one myself"? "Well, well," evidently, wasn't the thing at all. It was difficult to know whether to keep surprise out of one's voice or not, or to guess which course would be considered, by implication, the more insulting.

"How interesting," he said at last, striking what seemed to him a happy medium, and added smoothly, "and I suppose you met your husband through some theatrical interest?"

"Oh no, good gracious!" Mrs. Myers jerked her head, evidently preparing to embark on a favourite topic, "oh no, 'e wasn't a celebrity *then*. Mr. Myers was a plasterer's labourer when I first met 'im—that's not so very great, is it? And so 'e continued a good many years after, too, until 'e come into the property."

"The property?"

"Yes, this 'ouse where we live now, and three others in the same row. It come to 'im through 'is mother's side of the family, because 'o course we're Londoners ourselves; we never 'ad anything to do with Dublin before that." There was a scorn in her voice which seemed to compensate her for much, for she looked about her with pleasure as she spoke, and sniffed contemptuously. "I will say, though," she added, as they turned a corner and came into a particularly mean and lifeless street, "that Mr. Myers always knew a lot about the theatre, even in those days. 'E never wasted a penny on tobacco or drink, it all went on the front row of the gallery, and rummaging about for old books orf of the bookstalls, and a penny 'ere and tuppence there for 'is old prints and plates and playbills—oh, you never see such a collection. 'E's got some pretty things, too, especially the tinsel pictures and little theatres. I expect 'e'll show you a lot of it if you've time."

"That would be very nice," said Charles, "but what I really wanted to ask him was about a touring company that's somewhere in Ireland at the moment. I'm afraid he's hardly likely, though, to follow up anything so . . . well, so unimportant."

"Oh, good lor', if it's theatrical 'e'll know about it, you needn't worry," said Mrs. Myers. She freed one hand from the jug and pointed with mingled pride and scorn at a piece of paper lying in the gutter. "If Mr. Myers was walking along with us now," she said, "which 'e couldn't 'ardly be doing, now 'e's an invalid, 'e'd 'ave to stop and stir that over with 'is stick, just in case it was an old bit of a play advertisement, or an old programme, or some rubbish. 'E doesn't miss nothing."

They stopped in front of a little house identical with all the

others, with a tiled tunnel up one side of it and a front door with whitened step confronting the street.

"You stay 'ere, sir, please," said Mrs. Myers, "while I pop up the entry and let you in." She disappeared with her jug, and Charles was left for some time standing face to face with the polished knocker and wondering uneasily what social preparations were having to be made before he could be admitted.

Presently Mrs. Myers opened the door, looking flushed.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, sir," she said, "Mr. Myers is in all right, and 'e'll be quite pleased to see you."

She led the way up a small steep, carpeted staircase to a tiny landing, just large enough to accommodate three doors and the head of the stair. One of these doors was open, and Charles was shown into a densely furnished little front sitting-room which glowed and winked mysteriously like a casket of rubies.

"Mr. Myers will be with you directly, sir—just make yourself at 'ome."

As soon as he was alone Charles laid his hat and book on the crimson tablecloth and looked about him, puzzled and pleased by the bizarre impression of richness which the room made. The effect, he found, came chiefly from the crowded walls, which were as full of colour and as stirringly alive with points of light as a decorated Christmas tree, peopled in every inch of available space with splendid figures in tinsel jewellery and armour—striking attitudes, brandishing swords, bestriding fabulously caparisoned chargers which reared and pranced to the polished limits of their frames. There were so many of them, each in a shining maple-wood frame the colour of honey, that the wallpaper was almost completely hidden; they were hung in tiers, shoulder to shoulder and one above the other, so that the top row glimmered indistinctly below the picture rail. Against this brilliance, and rich in their own dark way, stood several tall mahogany bookcases with glass doors, as closely crammed with books—the spaces between the upright rows being stuffed with horizontal volumes, yet all with a sense of knowledgeable order—as only a collector's shelves can be; and in each corner of the room, under the table and even under the chairs, there were books and more books, stacks of programmes and prints tied up with string, and neat labelled pregnant-

looking paper parcels. The table itself was almost covered with large volumes, symmetrically arranged like albums, and on a little cabinet beside the fireplace a miniature theatre of rococo-design and gaudy colouring was set up, the tiny stage dressed in a woodland scene and peopled with mysteriously gesticulating pasteboard figures.

Fascinated, Charles had moved round the table to examine this toy, and was bending down to peer into the enchanted glade, when the door closed behind him and he turned to find that Mr. Myers had come into the room. He was a small, formal-looking, pink and white old man, with thick white hair and a childishly clear complexion. He was evidently dressed in his best, and his thick gold ring and flowing tie made it instantly clear that he was conscious of himself as a character, as a celebrity to whom respectful visitors were due. The expression of his mouth, as he stood and surveyed Charles and slowly smoothed his hands one over the other, was melancholy and severe, and at the same time sensitive. He was clearly setting store by the visit, and expecting great things of it—though Charles, receiving a surprising and confused impression, could not imagine what. He nevertheless felt a touch of sympathetic regret that he had come only with what must seem a very trivial enquiry, and not to listen to anecdotes and admire possessions.

"This is very kind of you," he said, moving carefully round the table to shake hands; "I hope you'll forgive me for disturbing you like this, but I know you're a great expert on theatrical matters, and I thought you might be able to tell me something I wanted to know."

"You're very welcome, very welcome indeed," said the old man gravely. He shook hands with cold dignity, and motioned Charles to a chair. "I'm always pleased to see people who're interested in the theatre. It isn't everyone who understands as much of it as I do. I've devoted my life to it."

He took a box of matches from the mantelpiece, and standing on the fender reached up with considerable difficulty and lit the gas. When he had adjusted the flame to his liking he looked critically round the room and then at Charles, fixing his eyes on his face with a watchful expression. Charles smiled.

"I've just been admiring your pictures," he said. "You have some wonderful things."

But the old man did not respond, and seemed even dissatisfied.

"I think we'll have a little fire," he said, "this room's apt to be a trifle chilly in the evening."

"Oh no, not for me—please," said Charles, noticing for the first time that the room was particularly airless and very warm, "it's not at all cold in here, and I really mustn't keep you more than a few minutes." But Myers was already bending on one knee in front of the grate, and with a lighted match in one hand had laid the paper fan carefully aside, and was setting the flame to the paper and sticks concealed behind it. He watched the fire until it was well alight, and then turned his head to survey the room again, so that Charles, following the direction of his gaze and seeing the coloured sparks and sequins which sprang up in the tinsel pictures all over the walls, realised with touched surprise that the old man's object had had nothing to do with warmth, but was the heightening of the singular beauties of his little room.

"What a remarkably beautiful effect that makes," he said. "Do tell me about them—the pictures, I mean. I've never seen anything at all like them before."

The old man had got up painfully from the hearth, and was now dusting the knees of his trousers with a fastidious hand.

"I don't suppose you 'ave," he said, beginning to thaw a little. "There's very few people as understands the value of what I've got in this 'ouse. I sometimes forget the half of what I've got, myself. Though I've a very good memory." He turned to contemplate a picture hanging beside the fireplace, and Charles, curious as well as sensitive to what was expected of him, got up and joined him.

"Now," said Mr. Myers, "do you know what that is?" He looked from the picture to Charles's face and back again, and gave an important little cough.

"Why," said Charles, hastily putting on his spectacles and bending to inspect the tinsel-encrusted engraving of a theatrical figure, "why, I believe it's Othello."

"So it is," said the other, giving him a sharp glance. "I'm glad to see you know something about Shakespeare."

"It's very handsome indeed," said Charles. "It's hand-coloured,

isn't it? And those charming little shining ornaments stuck all over it. Did you—forgive my ignorance—did you colour and ornament these engravings yourself?"

A gleam of scornful pleasure came into the old man's eye.

"Of course not," he said harshly, watching Charles with visibly growing excitement. "Where would I go to buy those tinsel ornaments, if I wanted to?"

"I've no idea. I've seen nothing like them before."

"No, and you won't again—at least not in such a collection as mine. Not if you was to go to the British Museum, you wouldn't—nothing to touch it. This is the best there is, you know. I've given my life to it."

"I can see that they're absolutely unique," said Charles, "and very beautiful. I shouldn't have said they were done in this century at all."

"Ah! Now you're talking. Of course they weren't. The best of them was done about a hundred years ago. And d'you know how? Well, supposing you was a young man about that time, going to see some actress you admired in a particular part—Madame Vestris, let's say—and you want some little memento after the performance. What do you do? You can't go and buy a picture postcard of the lady; there weren't such things in those days." He gave Charles a sharp look, as though expecting him to contradict this, and even waited a moment for him to do so. Charles nodded attentively. "So what do you do? You go to a theatrical stationer—Skelton or Hodgson or Park perhaps—and you buy a fine plate of the lady, like this one." He pointed to a glittering Titania in one of the upper rows. "Mind, it isn't coloured then, it's just a copper-plate engraving. So then you take it home with you, see, and you colour it nicely, and you get a nice bit of satin from the wife and cut it out and paste it on over the skirt, and paint in the folds. And then you go back to the shop and buy the proper tinsels for that picture—the little wand and crown and gold buskins, and all the little leaves and stars and shells that she's got scattered about 'er—and you stick 'em all on in the right places, and you buy a nice bird's-eye maple the right size, and you make a good job of 'er. On the whole thing, very likely, you might have spent as much as a pound."

"What a charming hobby," said Charles. "I should love to do one."

"Yes, well, you never will," said Mr. Myers with pleasure. "And why? Because you couldn't get the proper ornaments. It's no good just cutting out bits of tinsel paper; the beauty's in the embossing, and that's die-stamper's work."

He turned to the cabinet on which the toy theatre was standing, and pulled open a drawer.

"There, you see! Those are the only unused tinsels you'll see, in mint condition. And here are all the dies and tools—a full set. You'll never see those anywhere else, either, because I'm the only person to 'ave 'em, as I'm aware of."

"And the little theatre," said Charles, "that seems to strike a note in my memory somewhere, but I can't place it. I don't think I can ever have had one as a child."

"You wouldn't 'ave one like *that*," said Myers. "That's a good one. You might 'ave 'ad some of the foreign rubbish that they make now, in Czechoslovakia. I've got some of those, too, of course—I've got some of everything to do with Juvenile Drama. But I don't take any notice of them. I wouldn't be bothered with them, except to follow the subject right out to the end. But this is what I like. This is the real thing."

He ran a loving finger along the tin footlights and with the other hand expertly lowered the curtain. Then he looked up at Charles with a severe expression.

"'Ave you ever 'eard of Robert Louis Stevenson?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, you may 'ave 'eard of him, but 'ave you *read* him? It's not at all the same thing."

"I've even read him," said Charles, "I'm very fond of him."

"You may ha' done," said the old man, in a grumbling voice. "I can't say. I've never had the benefit of education. Everything *I've* learned, I've picked up for myself. Well, there's that piece he wrote, 'Penny Plain Twopence Coloured.' That'll give you some idea. When he was a lad, Skelt and Redington were still in business, and the lads could buy the sheets of characters for a penny each, and colour them themselves, and mount 'em up, and 'ave a little book of the play and give a performance in the parlour."

He wound up the curtain again and pointed to the stage. "Do you know what play that is?"

"I'm afraid I don't. It's very attractive."

"No, well, I didn't suppose you would. 'The Maid and the Magpie'—one I was always fond of. I could show you the earliest known sheets of that play, if I could only lay my hands on 'em. Not coloured or touched in any way, but mint condition—just as they come off the plate."

He opened a door at the bottom of one of the bookcases and began to ferret leisurely about in the cupboard. Charles sat down on a little velvet-seated chair, and began to wonder how he was to bring the conversation round to present-day touring companies. On any other day, and in any other circumstances, he could happily have given himself up to Mr. Myers' authority and have explored this antiquarian and miniature theatrical world with respectful gusto; but in his present anxiety the old man's determined possession of the conversation began to irritate him, and he several times, watching the earnestly busy head and shoulders at work at the cupboard, brought himself nearly to the point of a disillusioning question. But each time he did so, Myers flung him a scrap of information over his shoulder, or asked him if he had ever seen this or come across that, and always with such scornful pleasure and innocent triumph that Charles had not the heart to interrupt him. There was something touching in the old man's brusque assumption of exclusive knowledge—which in his own subject was probably not exaggerated—but which seemed to have hypnotised him into believing that he alone possessed understanding in a world of ignorance. But perhaps, thought Charles, if I could meet him with even some crumbs of his own specialised knowledge, he would drop this testy, scornful manner and take me into his confidence. He suspects that I am not really interested, and so bullies me. He is tired of ignorant listeners. He is getting old. He can open his heart only to the initiate.

He looked round the room with curiosity now thoroughly awake, and saw it no longer as an amusing surprise thrown in by chance in the course of his own wanderings, but as a monument to the life's work of a plasterer's labourer, who had never wasted a

penny on tobacco or drink but had always spent what he could spare in this strangely glittering little backwater of the drama, with a single-mindedness that would have done credit to a scholar and at the cost of what privations to himself and his family heaven only knew; so that he felt suddenly ashamed, and no longer wished to cut short the old man's display of his possessions—still less to betray amusement of his naïve suspicion that his visitor could never have heard of Stevenson or seen a play of Shakespeare. Instead, he felt that his own intrusion had been vulgar, and that he must now provide as good an audience as possible, deferring his question until he should have earned an answer. The thought came into his mind—how Miriam would love all this! But the thought of Miriam recalled Isabella and Sybil and the talk of going to California, and stirred him to an uneasy sense of urgency and apprehension. He sighed.

"I'm afraid you aren't interested," said Myers, bringing a pile of prints to the table and looking at him accusingly from under his eyebrows.

"Oh yes—on the contrary. I just happened to think of something rather unpleasant."

"Well, put it out of your mind while I show you these. You can't attend to two subjects at once."

Rebuked, Charles moved to the table and sat down, thrusting his knees in under the heavy tablecloth.

"Do you think there's any chance that there won't be a war?" he said, accepting the sheet of characters which the old man handed him.

"'Ow should I know?" said Myers. "I'm not interested. Whatever they do I shan't take any notice." He pointed with a relentless forefinger to the bottom of the paper. "There's the publisher's name, see. It doesn't give the year, but you can date this one to within a couple of years from 'is list of plays, and from the fact that the next lot was issued from a different address."

Charles listened at first with care, taking sheet after sheet in his hands and looking at them attentively; but after a time they all began to look very much the same, and he found himself pursuing his own thoughts undisturbed while the instructive stream of com-

ment flowed triumphantly. Presently, finding that the voice had stopped and that Myers was looking at him enquiringly, he made a guilty effort to conceal his inattention.

"Did you . . . did you find all these in Dublin?" he said at random, afraid that almost any other question would betray the fact that he had long ago ceased to listen.

"Dublin? You wouldn't find anything of any interest in *Dublin*. Nearly everything that you see in this 'ouse was bought in different parts of London, over a period of forty years or more. I sometimes find a book 'ere, but not many even of them. The bulk of the stuff I brought over with me eleven years ago, when I come into the property. Nobody understands anything about it in this country."

"You must find it rather dull then, living here, if you can't increase your collection."

"It doesn't need increasing," said Myers. "It's the best there is. What I've been doing now for the past five years is finding out 'ow much I've got, and making a catalogue. Besides," he added grandiosely, "I've got contacts all over London and the provinces, wherever I need 'em. If anything special comes into the market they let me know. I've got my 'ands just about full."

"And the present-day theatre," said Charles cunningly, "I expect you find that rather dull in Dublin, too, don't you? Or do you follow it?"

"Oh, I follow it, o' course. You can't break the 'abits of a life-time just by moving your residence. And the theatre's never dull, you know, to a man of my knowledge. Especially the music 'alls."

"They told me at The Grapes," said Charles, "that you even followed the touring companies, and knew what they were playing and who was in them."

"So I do, for the most part. They don't get the best 'ere, you know, at least not very often. Not like Manchester or Liverpool. Dublin's very low down in the provinces, if you look at it like that. A dead end, and doesn't know it."

"And what about the companies," said Charles, "that tour the other Irish towns? Cork, for instance, and . . . well, Limerick? And even smaller places? I suppose you don't keep any account of those?"

"I keep account," said Myers, "without taking particular no-

tice, if you follow me. It's 'abit, chiefly. Though mind you," he said judiciously, "you'll sometimes come across something good, even outside Dublin. Especially in summer. They play the resorts. I've seen one or two that weren't bad, when we've been at the seaside for a week for our summer 'oliday."

"Really? Where do you go?"

"Oh, I 'aven't been for years. Used to be Bray, mostly. But the party we used to know as 'ad a boarding-'ouse there 'as given up."

"I wanted to find out about a touring company," said Charles, "only I don't know the name. I only know the name of one of the people in it. I suppose you've never heard of Eileen Oram?"

The old man pinched his lower lip and frowned at the tablecloth, evidently not liking the way the question had been phrased. Charles saw at once that the name meant nothing to him, but that he was unwilling to admit this, and had accepted the supposition as a challenge.

"Oram," he said, and looked up doubtfully under his frosty eyebrows. "What was there special about the company? Can you mention any other name?"

"No, I can't. But I think it's a new tour, and the company's in Ireland now. They've probably just started."

Still pinching and folding his lip Myers got up from the table and went to a stack of papers and parcels heaped up in forbidding confusion on a chair beside the door.

"I expect I do know it really," he said, "if I can only call it to mind. There's so many new names nowadays." He pulled a few small handbills out of the pile and laid them on the top while he brought out from his coat pocket and put on a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles. "These are what they 'and out to the public-houses and shops," he said, scanning the first bill carefully and then laying it aside, "I've got a trunk full of 'em in the back room, going back over eleven years."

Charles watched him in silence.

"Do let me help you look," he said at last, unable to sit still any longer and making a futile effort to control his hope. It was, of course, absurd to expect that Eileen's name was to be found anywhere in that pile of untidy rubbish, or that the moment of relief

from disappointment had come at last; but reason was helpless against the sudden surge of expectancy which brought him to his feet, and he stretched his hand out eagerly to the pile of papers.

"Sit down, sit down," said Myers crossly, waving him away with one hand. "If it's 'ere, I shall find it. I shall know the name as soon as I see it in print. What's the use of keepin' all this stuff for reference, if I never use it? You wait a minute."

Charles retreated to the hearthrug and lit a cigarette. I won't watch him, he thought; and forced himself to survey the room at leisure, dwelling in turn on the frozen attitudes and Christmas-tree brightness of the tinsel pictures, keeping his eyes away from the peering figure in the corner.

"I don't mind you smokin'," said Myers suddenly, without looking up, "but be careful where you throw the matches—that's all."

"I'm so sorry," said Charles, "I should have asked you. I was so absorbed, I didn't think of it." He gave up the attempt to keep his eyes on the pictures, and watched Myers with strained attention, his hope still tremblingly supported, while he endured, second by second, the dread that with the next syllable that Myers spoke it must inevitably fall.

"'Ere we are," said Myers abruptly, turning with a narrow brownish sheet of paper in his hand and coming to the table, "why didn't you say Leon MacLeonard in the first place? I'd ha' known what you meant then, straight orf. I couldn't ha' given you the names of the 'ole cast, not without lookin' it up—though I could ha' done that twenty years ago, I dare say, 'aving once seen it. My memory's a worry."

He laid the bill on the table, and ran his powerful forefinger beneath Leon MacLeonard's name and the announcement of the tour, and then, sketching through the list of plays and dates, brought it to a triumphant stop under the name Eileen Oram, third in a list of about twelve names printed in diminishing type. He looked up at Charles with a twinkle of pleasure, the grimness of his face relaxed in the beginnings of a smile.

"There you are, you see. I thought I was bound to 'ave it, somewhere or other. I expect I picked this up at The Grapes, without taking much notice."

Charles leaned with his hands on the table and stared at the bill, seeing nothing but the unlikely, incredible, suddenly totally unfamiliar-seeming name on which the broad tip of Myers' forefinger still rested. He had dwelt on it in imagination for so long that now, seeing it in heavy print on this flimsy sheet, it looked as uncertain and grotesque as a misspelt word written out many times in doubt on a piece of blotting paper.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?" said Myers, seemingly disappointed by the lack of response.

"Yes. Yes, it is. Where is the company now?"

Myers turned back to the sheet, adjusting his spectacles.

"Well, let's see, what's the date? 'Ere we are; second week of the tour, Ennistymon. Next week, Claremorris, and followin' that, Galway. Are you going to be in any of those places?"

"Yes, I could be, easily. They'll still be in Ennistymon tomorrow? I should like to catch up with them."

"Yes. It doesn't say what they'll be playing tomorrow. It's a nice list, though. *Merchant of Venice*. *Othello*. *East Lynne*. *Dracula*. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. All strong parts for MacLeonard. 'E's quite good, you know; the old type. I saw 'im several years ago in Bray. Can't say I know much about the others."

Charles stared fixedly at the paper, his excitement only now beginning to rise. There was Eileen's name, gathering itself together and becoming clear; and the bill was new, and the date was the present, and she was not so very far away. He drew a deep breath.

"Yes, well," Myers was saying, "that's what I always used to do myself. Wherever I was, and whatever 'appened to be on, I went to see it. O' course I've seen a lot o' rubbish in that way, but I've also 'ad some very interesting experiences." He looked at Charles over his spectacles, trying to discover the cause of his long silence. "You might let me know what it's like, if you're passing this way again."

"I will, of course," said Charles, recovering himself. "And I can't tell you how grateful . . ."

"And you might let me 'ave a programme. Specially if it's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; I 'aven't got one o' that. Or a picture postcard of

MacLeonard, just as a memento. I never like to lose an opportunity . . .”

Pushing round the revolving door of the hotel, Charles thought with remorse that perhaps he had taken his leave with too great abruptness, hurrying off with insane eagerness and perhaps not even pausing to thank Myers sufficiently. Oh, we'll send him a programme, though, he thought joyfully. And picture postcards and anything else we can lay hands on. . . .

He stopped at the hall-porter's desk, in self-assurance so buoyant that he wanted to laugh, enchanted to have such a wonderful question to ask him.

But in the early hours of the morning, waking for perhaps the twentieth time to look at his watch and reassure himself that there were still some hours before he could start for Ennistymon, he found his head throbbing with a dull pain which had crept into his sleep, and was dismayed when he lay down again to feel the first uneasy intimations of nausea.

God, it *can't* be. . . .

He lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes against the whirling dark, his senses now miserably alert to the old humiliating symptoms.

When the train left for Ennistymon he was already prostrate with the merciless migraine which had lain in wait for him at intervals ever since childhood, menacing his occasions of greatest tension and exaltation, and refusing to be dealt with. The hours passed in a slow trance of misery and sickness while he lay with closed eyes, knowing the uselessness of resistance, incapable of effort and even unable to bear the occasional streaks of dusty sunlight which came in with the stirring of the curtains.

7

That evening, in the unreal and fragile condition of one newly awakened from the dead, Charles walked carefully down the long flight of stone steps leading into the garden of the hotel above Ennistymon, and paused on the lawn, breathing the delicious air with pleasure and gazing across at the waterfall and the town. At least, if a mean fate had decided to deal him a physical blow in his first moment of triumph, the crisis had been passed by afternoon, and he had been able to make the journey in the shaken, sober, but tremulously cheerful state peculiar to convalescence. He had even felt faintly hungry when he arrived, and had eaten some thin toast with a sense of achievement.

It was curious, he reflected, his eyes following the distant lines of bridge and whitewashed town and the skeins of water lacing the broad shelves of the falls, that physical accident or illness, with which a healthy person never reckoned, seized their rare occasions, as though in revenge, at those very moments when they could inflict the maximum of nuisance and humiliation. The worst migraine of his life had fallen on the most important day of his Final Schools at Oxford, yet without, of course, affording him a convincing excuse for his poor degree. The day before his wedding he had stumbled clumsily in getting out of a taxi, spraining his knee, and had limped through the ceremony in a manner painful to himself and exasperating to Isabella, who thought he might have concealed it and hadn't tried. And the first time he had had a day alone with Eileen in the country, and had made love to her in

the long grass of a meadow by the river, he had been so badly bitten by midges that his left eye had slowly closed, and Eileen, whom the midges had inexplicably left alone, had been convulsed by an inner conflict between sympathy and laughter. And now at last, he thought, on the very day when I shall see her again after ten years, I have to have a sick headache, and turn up in Ennistymon looking like a death's-head.

The pain and sickness were gone, and he felt subdued and curiously light-headed. The sensible thing would be to put off seeing her until the morning, but he knew that this was impossible. After not seeing her for ten years, he thought, one ought to be able to wait for another night; and knew he would not.

The thought that Eileen was somewhere in that whitewashed town, which looked as though it had been sketched by a facile hand simply to give design and drama to the head of the cascade, and that she must even now be dressing for that night's performance, filled him with a mixture of elation and deep anxiety. During these past weeks, and even as lately as on the journey from Dublin, this end to his search had shone with single promise, as though, once achieved, all difficulties would disappear and all doubts vanish. But now, when he knew that he would certainly see her within the next few hours, he was oppressed by dread. She would be angry that he had come. Worse still, his presence would be merely an embarrassment. Or, when he spoke her name, he would have the horror of realising that what he had been pursuing existed now only in imagination, and that the face he had come so far to see was the face of a stranger.

With a guilty feeling of cowardice he had decided not to try and find her before the performance, but to go to the play, and receive the impact of first impressions in the shelter of the audience. There was an element in this of taking a sly advantage, of which he was faintly ashamed; but the idea, quite apart from the advantage it afforded him, was irresistible, and he had discussed the project with the hotel manager, who was surprisingly young and agreeable and eager to please.

"You've got a theatrical company in the town, I hear?"

"Ah, yes! Leon MacLeonard. He's very good. He's been here once before in the holiday season."

"What play are they doing this evening? I rather thought of going."

"Well now, let's see. *Othello*, I think. Yes, here's the list. My brother and I went last night, to *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, and thought it very good indeed. The little lord was played by a woman, you know, but she was very like a boy. MacLeonard was the grandfather, the earl."

"Was it Miss Oram who played Fauntleroy?"

"No, it was some other name. Miss Oram was Dearest, as they called the mother, I believe. They don't have programmes so it's hard to be certain of the names. There are several talented ladies in the company."

The theatre, the manager told him, was not really a theatre, but the old Protestant church, now used for secular purposes since the building of the new one. "They have a stage and all," he said, "it's very convenient. But of course the company bring their own curtains and scenery, and footlights too, I understand. They have a lorry full of stuff."

A little before nine o'clock, which was the advertised time of the performance, Charles asked his way to the Protestant church and strolled down into the town, going bareheaded in his character of summer visitor. Swallows were skimming over and under the stone bridge and gathering like beads on the telegraph wires, and children were hanging on the parapet over the falls and darting about the streets with the same erratic, dusk-inspired excitement. They stared at Charles as he passed, and men on street corners and women in doorways stared as well, all in the innocent yet faintly sinister Irish manner underlining the strangeness of the stranger. He was conscious of the slight strain of appearing at ease and unconcerned as he ran the gauntlet of their silent attention, and was glad when he came to the trodden and littery entrance of the makeshift theatre, and passed inside.

In what had once been the church porch a box-office had been constructed by means of a bare wooden partition with a pigeon-hole, and inside this a man in full make-up and a heavy overcoat was sitting on a property hamper and selling tickets. From inside the hall came sounds of a piano and violin being perfunctorily played. Charles bought a two-shilling ticket.

The hall was less than a quarter full, bare, dusty and very noisy. The back benches were crowded with young men and boys, who were smoking, whistling, clattering their heavy boots on the bare boards, and engaging in furtive wrestling. Near the front, but not at all in the first three rows of chairs, was a self-conscious sprinkling of respectable audience, mostly women, who were whispering and giggling and repeatedly turning round to see who was coming in. The middle part of the hall was completely empty. A young woman in an overcoat was playing the piano in a corner below the stage, and a haggard and heavily made-up young man scraping a violin and keeping a watchful eye on the bashful straggling in of newcomers at the door.

Charles chose a seat immediately behind two quietly behaved young men with well-brushed hair, evidently dressed in their best and conscious of social responsibility as part of the respectable audience—nothing to do with the rowdy element at the back. They glanced round at him politely as he sat down, and presently, as the piano and violin played on and on and there was still no sign of the doors being closed or the play beginning, offered him a cigarette. This contact established, Charles felt more at ease, better able to deal with the painfully acute suspense which now unnerved him.

Was it possible that she was now, this minute, somewhere behind that creased but still romantically suggestive curtain which shook and bulged from time to time so unexpectedly, while the pianist pedalled with callous emphasis to muffle the bumps? No, incredible. He had got there somehow by accident, without cause or explanation, as in a dream. There was nothing to connect this place with real experience.

The feeling of unreality grew. The buzz of talk, the clattering of boots grew louder as the minutes passed, and a haze of sweet tobacco smoke spread from the back benches. It was now long past nine o'clock, and stragglers were still coming in in twos and threes, and the piano still thumped and the violin scraped wearily. There were, however, hopeful signs. Someone kept gripping the centre edges of the curtain and making a peephole, evidently keeping a watch on the audience and judging whether it might be considered complete; and a chorus of whistles and a rhythmical beating of

feet from the back of the hall suggested that this anxious waiting for a full house could not be much further prolonged.

Suddenly the lights went out, and a roar of ribald approval greeted the darkness. The piano banged still more loudly, hurrying to a conclusion, and the footlights came on, went off, and finally went up again, casting a thrilling glamour up the crimson curtain. Charles sat forward, nervously clasping his hands. The curtain was moving; it was being parted cautiously in the middle; someone was coming out. A startling last chord banged from the piano, followed by a hasty afterthought correction, and a tall slender female figure in repertory-Shakespearian dress appeared in front of the curtain, smiling and holding up her hand for silence, and so close to the footlights that her chin and cheekbones cast extraordinary upward shadows.

Charles's heart stood still, and a thrill of terror and recognition ran through him. She's changed . . . she's older . . . I can't see her eyes . . . But she's changed, oh *God*, she's changed. . . .

Anguish gripped him. The actress's melodious voice was scarcely audible over the din which still continued cheerfully at the back of the hall, but as he strained to hear it, his eyes fixed in apprehension on her shadowed face, he suddenly felt a wave of inexpressible relief. It was not Eileen.

What she was saying, whether it was some prologue of their own devising, or merely a routine announcement or request for silence, he had no idea. He pressed his sweating palms together and sat back in his chair, sighing deeply. The figure above the footlights had disappeared, and the curtains were drawing apart in swinging jerks, disclosing a narrow strip of stage before a back-drop, and two brightly clad gentlemen who entered from the wings and engaged at once in inaudible conversation.

There was still a clatter of boots from the back of the hall, and the door kept opening with a boisterous creak, letting in a shaft of light. Turning round cautiously, Charles saw with surprise that the hall was nearly full; the light from the stage was reflected softly from many rows of faces, and though the uproar continued from the back the people near him were already wholly given up to the illusion, their bodies still, their eyes rapt and their mouths open. They were unconscious of or indifferent to the noise, and glancing

at their faces he had a sudden feeling that his scrutiny was indelicate, and turned back to the stage, dimly aware for the first time of the satisfaction which, in spite of the unnerving hazard of rowdiness, there must be in playing to so purely unsophisticated an audience. They were capable of destroying the play from sheer lack of comprehension of the actor's difficulties, and the good manners which that understanding implies; but that lack of imagination had also the corresponding virtue, that they were prepared—as a less childish and more experienced audience could never have been—to accept the players wholly for what they seemed, and to respond to their words and gestures with the immediate innocent emotion of real experience.

He fixed his eyes on the stage, but without attempting to listen to what was being said. He had not seen a performance of *Othello* since his schooldays, and now tried to remember the sequence of the play, and to guess how soon it would produce its female characters. There was Desdemona, of course. And wasn't there another woman, a waiting-maid or confidante of some sort? Surely, surely Eileen would be playing one or the other; there couldn't be so many talented ladies in a small company. . . .

He made an attempt to fix his attention on the actors, and to keep his eyes from anxiously watching the wings. The two characters were making a great noise now, shouting and hallooing and exchanging angry speeches with a bearded patriarch who had appeared on what was perhaps intended to be a balcony at the extreme corner of the stage, almost hidden by the curtain. The noise on the stage was competing well with the noise at the back of the hall, and gradually establishing ascendancy. Clearly it was the function of the first scene to bludgeon the audience into submission, and to persuade the ribald element at the back that there was something better worth listening to than their own scuffling.

Abruptly, the curtains jerked together, and in a moment parted again on the same scene, but without the balcony. There was a murmur of exclamation as Othello strolled in splendidly from the wings, his head bent attentively to Iago, his face grave. He came to the centre of the stage before he spoke, and the gust which had swept over the audience at the sight of his handsome coffee-coloured face, his swinging earrings and satin robes breathed itself

out in a half-awed, half-giggling whisper, and the noise subsided.

Charles watched him, fascinated. It was wonderful to see how quickly he managed to dominate the scene, and the means he used to convey the force of authority. He was as fully aware of the audience as they of him, and immediately entered into relations with them with a frankness which a less innocent audience would never have allowed, but which was clearly a deliberate technique for special circumstances. His eyes swept the audience, not in any pretence that they were a Venetian street, but as though he could clearly see them, and knew the name and address of any lout who dared to make a noise. He spoke rapidly and well, hurrying over the longer speeches which might tempt them to grow restive, and dwelling with deliberate emphasis on lines which expressed a simple emotion or took a step forward in the story. When they were quiet he withdrew into his part, and played as he must surely have preferred to play, though never without the careful underlining; but as soon as the door opened, or a pair of boots clattered or a cork popped, the pontifical authority was there again, speaking through flashing eyes and dramatic gestures, conveying a hypnotic menace to the undesirables. In this way, by sheer weight of his handsome and faintly threatening presence, he controlled his unpromising material and triumphed over the disadvantages of Shakespeare, long speeches, Moorish earrings and coffee-coloured make-up—any one of which might have wrecked a less experienced man, and lost him his audience through boredom or innocent ribaldry. So absorbed did Charles become in watching him, in detecting the tricks of magnetism and distinguishing them from the artist's vigorous attack, that for a time he lost all sense of his surroundings, and even forgot what he was waiting for and why he had come; so that when Desdemona was brought before the Duke he looked at her abstractedly and without surprise, until he saw that it was Eileen.

He started inwardly, and held his breath, and for a moment was uncertain. If it were she, she was changed almost beyond recognition, and it was a moment before he realised what was disguising her. The hair under her gold fillet was smooth and yellow, hiding her neck and giving her an air of meekness totally foreign to her. He let his breath go in a faint sigh, and sat very still, feeling his

heart beating. Desdemona was going to speak: her father's hand was stretched out to her, the actors' eyes were all upon her, and she was lifting up her absurdly golden head.

"My noble father,
I do perceive here a divided duty . . ."

Oh God, thought Charles, it *is*! He sat forward, involuntarily smiling, unconscious of his sudden movement and his fatuous expression, aware only of the echoes which her voice awoke, and the buoyant sense of joy with which it filled him. Seeing her now, confirming the clear inflexions of her voice and the forgotten familiar gentleness of her movements, he was dismayed to realise how imperfectly he had remembered her. She had not changed: or if she had, it was simply that the structure of her features had emerged more clearly and was seen in essence, without the beguiling softness of first youth; and the fine-drawn serious delicacy of her face moved him.

Sighing, he watched and listened, conscious of the vague stirring of old sensations which her voice evoked, but by now so completely identified with her in anxious sympathy that he hardly knew what he himself thought or felt. He was now aware for the first time of the limitations of the stage, and in his own limbs felt the actors' difficulty in moving in that tiny space without collision. His throat ached with the strain of competing with hollow echoes, and he became morbidly sensitive to the continued furtive disturbance at the back of the hall. MacLeonard's generous theatricalism now seemed not only logical but necessary; restraint and subtlety would have been wasted on this audience; what they demanded and understood were the flamboyant gestures of Myers' tinsel pictures—strong emotions, easy tears, tremendous bravery. And yet a careful course had to be steered, for the least tenderness produced an urchin merriment in the back benches, and a kiss of greeting was received with noisy embarrassment. Charles began to wish that Eileen would raise her voice, for her quiet intensity was failing to get across, and Othello's deliberate breadth of manner was dominating every scene, making him jealous. Yet the women in the audience, he thought, were sympathetic to Desdemona; their

faces showed in the half-light rapt in approval, as though they understood and agreed with her devotion. Only an occasional open mouth or unconscious grin suggested that they found a coffee-coloured husband difficult to swallow.

At the end of the second act there was an interval. The lights clicked on suddenly, there was immediate uproar and an ugly rush for the door. It seemed to be a point of honour with the men and boys to get out of the place as rapidly as possible, and with as much noise; the women, however, and the two respectable young men in front of Charles stayed in their places, and one or two of the more daring girls began self-consciously to smoke. A door beside the stage opened a little way, and Iago, smoking a cigarette, looked cautiously out. He seemed to be looking for somebody, and presently, catching sight of a middle-aged man in a tweed suit, beckoned him vigorously, and the two disappeared through the door together, opening it just wide enough to give the front rows a tantalising glimpse of a crowded dressing-room in all its brightness of movement and confusion. Charles watched this door intently for the rest of the interval, but it did not open again, and presently the lights went out abruptly and the footlights came on, and the deafening clamour of boots at the back of the hall, the banging and swinging of the door and the mixed uproar of voices, shovings, laughter, scraping of benches and striking of matches was leisurely repeated with as much riot and noise as at the beginning of the performance.

At length, after several irritable chords on the piano, the curtains parted, and Desdemona, Cassio and Emilia came on together, earnestly talking and totally inaudible. Immediately Charles's nervous agony began again. He strained to hear, but although he could see from Eileen's face that she was almost shouting, the din drowned every word, and she and Emilia exchanged desperate glances. Charles began to tremble, and before he knew what he was doing had turned round and fiercely shouted "Be quiet!" in a voice which startled him horribly. There were one or two ribald replies from the back of the hall, but a few voices in the audience took up his cry with sympathy, and with such genuine indignation that the noise at the back dwindled to a sheepish murmur, and presently

stopped. The players had scarcely faltered, and now went on rapidly, with an air of nervous determination, and were perceptibly relieved when Othello made his entrance.

The audience was quiet now, and gradually the actors lost their air of apprehension and boldly attacked the problem (complicated by the creaking stage and other difficulties) of conveying inevitable tragedy. Charles's pulses quieted down and he became lost in the play, his spirit moving about the stage with Eileen, speaking her lines, encountering her difficulties, and at the same time aware of some part of himself which remained in the audience, sensitive to its response and alert to criticism. Presently, from the little involuntary sighs and murmurs of the women near him, he began to sense their feeling towards Desdemona and Othello, and noticed with interest how much it differed from his own. They were both fascinated and repelled by Othello's colour, romantic understatement though it was; his relationship to Desdemona was morbid to them, and they visibly shuddered at him as though he had been an ogre. Yet—and this was what Charles found specially curious—they accepted his obscene jealousy without question, as something logical and right, which might happen in any home. To them, he was behaving as a husband should, who heard Iago's aspersions on his wife's chastity.

So these, thought Charles, stealing a sidelong glance at the rapt faces, are the imaginations Shakespeare wrote for. Unchastity is the sin which cannot be forgiven, and none of them will be shocked at all when they see the murder. Sorry, of course, because Desdemona is really chaste, and the poor gentleman is mistaken: but not morally outraged, as I am: not even surprised. They see Othello as a monster, but only because he is brown and rolls his eyes; whereas to me he would be a monster in any colour—a lunatic of indecent suspicion, without a shred of justice or common sense in his whole character. I can't *bear* the way he's working up his dirty case against Desdemona . . . and without even asking her a straight question, the mad idiot, or stopping for a moment to consider whether it's likely. . . .

But these women round me, and even the hateful rowdies at the back of the hall, are drinking it in without question. They are as morally certain about chastity as the Elizabethans, and don't even

wish, as I do, that Desdemona would get angry about it, or defend herself. No, they approve of all this wifely meekness, and the strewing of corpses in the last scene will strike them as inevitable. The tragedy is going home to them without a murmur of civilised protest.

He became lost again in the action of the play, and again with nerves taut over every word that Desdemona spoke, and senses morbidly alert for the least breath of interruption. Now that she was alone with Emilia, letting down her yellow hair at the mirror and preparing for sleep, a new menace emanated from the back rows, and made him tremble. "Prithee, unpin me," said Desdemona—and there was a smothered laugh. They were growing uneasy because she was going to bed, and were expressing their deep embarrassment with furtive giggles. Both Desdemona and Emilia, he thought, were aware of the danger, and Eileen was growing nervous. Only Emilia, more experienced perhaps or more robust, was maintaining her cheerful assurance and refusing to be intimidated. But then, she had all along got her laughs precisely where Shakespeare intended, and was buoyed up with the heartening knowledge that there were more to come.

Suddenly Eileen's voice, timid and sad, never a singer's voice, broke into her willow song, and Charles pressed his hands together in an agony of apprehension, breathing as she breathed, on tenter-hooks lest they should make it more difficult for her. There was something infinitely pathetic in the clear little voice, which had nothing in common with Eileen's speaking voice, and was curiously like a child's, determined but a little breathy and uncertain. In a way it was right and touching that Desdemona should sing like that, interrupting herself to speak as she handed Emilia her bracelets, and going on with her song in quiet snatches indifferent to the effect; and even the rowdies seemed to feel this, and were quiet. Though they'd like it much better, Charles told himself with bitter hostility, if she came right down to the footlights and sang it loudly like a concert number, with a jig to follow.

"O, these men, these men!
Dost thou in conscience think—tell
me, Emilia—

white pillow, must be listening too, and inwardly trembling at the threat of pathos and disaster.

Damn them, he thought, oh *damn* them; for Othello's sad kiss on Desdemona's cheek was greeted with a cheerful whistle from the back, followed by shamefaced laughter.

I can't stand it, thought Charles. I must get out of here. I'll find her afterwards.

But Desdemona was waking on her pillow, and he sat still in a paralysis of sympathy.

"Who's there? Othello?"

"Ay, Desdemona."

"Will you come to bed, my lord?"

Oh God, oh God, of course they think that's funny. . . .

From the way Othello rushed at his next line Charles knew that he feared this line of Desdemona's as a crucial danger, and sighed with relief when he strode down to the footlights, warning her to prepare her soul. The tittering died away. This religious point, apparently, they regarded as serious. One did not laugh at prayer or the threat of damnation.

A killing, too, they seemed to understand and appreciate, for they became completely quiet when they saw without shadow of doubt that he intended to murder her, and sat in uneasy silence before the impending tragedy. The power and horror of it was subduing them at last, and even Charles, shaken as he was and sweating with apprehension, involuntarily lost touch with his surroundings, and was caught up into suffering and pity in a moment of pure illusion.

But once the knocking at the door had startled him and Othello had sprung up from the accomplished murder, Charles found himself sighing with inexpressible relief, and realised that nothing the audience did could disturb him now, since Desdemona was safely dead and Eileen's difficulties over. The excitement on the stage, Othello's howls of remorse, Emilia's accusations, had now become simply shouting and confusion, and he found himself eagerly consulting his watch in the difficult light and wondering how soon it would end. Whatever happened now, Eileen was out of it. She could lie snug and quiet among the bedclothes and get her breath, and perhaps already was thinking of something else. Or was the

nervous tension always there, until the final curtain? All the same, it must be a relief to be nicely dead, and able to leave the final moments to MacLeonard.

MacLeonard's difficulties were not over. The bodies were piling up, Desdemona and Emilia dead, Iago wounded, and his own suicide only a few lines off. The brown grease-paint was running with sweat on his face and chest, and he was making a heroic effort to dominate the end. But for some unfathomable reason—since there were no buses to be caught and no conceivable reason for hurry in Ennistymon—the back benches had decided that as the end was obviously approaching it was time to go, and got up almost to a man and began to clatter through the door. It was hopeless, and Othello died as rapidly as possible, with some ugly looks at the audience, but with dignity marvellously unimpaired. The closing lines of the play were heard by nobody, and the lights came on at once after the final curtain, as though everybody realised that it was useless to expect prolonged applause.

The two-shilling seats, however, clapped vigorously, as though anxious to make up for the bad behaviour of the sixpennies, and in a few moments MacLeonard appeared before the curtain and bowed with an air of reserve, making a courteous little gesture with one hand towards the stalls, and ignoring the rest of the house. The curtain bulged behind him, and he turned to lead out Desdemona by the hand, and then Emilia and Iago. Everybody who was not trooping out was now standing up and clapping, and Charles beat his hands together until they hurt, his eyes fixed on Eileen's exhausted face. All four actors evidently felt that they had had a gruelling evening, and were barely able to pretend that they had enjoyed themselves. Still, they bowed, and went through their little pantomime of appreciation, but with grave looks, and an air of being thankful that it was over. Eileen looked for a moment blankly in Charles's direction, and he stopped clapping and pretended to be searching for something, in a fit of inexplicable cowardice at the thought of recognition. But she had not seen him, and when the curtain closed behind them for the last time he sat among the empty chairs with beating heart.

Presently, when nearly everybody was gone, he got up quickly and went to the door of the dressing-room and knocked. It was

opened at once by one of the actors, who was partly undressed and wiping his face with a towel.

"I wondered if I could see Miss Oram," said Charles, not daring to look beyond him into the room.

"Sure," said the young man. "I don't know whether she's dressed yet. D'you mind coming in?"

Charles stepped into the cheerful noise and confusion of the dressing-room, and the young man shut the door behind him. The men of the cast were dressing and cleaning off their make-up, sitting on hampers, taking turns at a mirror propped on a kitchen chair and accommodating themselves as best they could in the bare room. MacLeonard himself was sitting at the only table, smoking a cigarette and smearing grease over his plump brown chest. His face was already clean, and now that his wig was off he appeared as a handsome middle-aged man with greyish hair, gazing at himself with interest in the mirror. Eileen and the actress who had played Emilia were nowhere to be seen, but there was a cotton sheet hung on a string across one part of the room, and Charles guessed that they were behind it.

MacLeonard, seeing him in the mirror as he stood awkwardly in the crowded room, not knowing what to do next, laid down his cigarette among the sticks of grease-paint and turned round with a benevolent expression. He was evidently uncertain whether he knew Charles or not, but decided to take it for granted that he did, and held out a welcoming hand.

"Awfully nice of you to come round," he said. "You were out in front, weren't you? I thought I recognised you. What did you think of it?"

"I thought it was wonderfully good," said Charles, glancing down at his knuckles where MacLeonard's ring had hurt him. "I don't know how you managed to get so much across, with such a difficult audience."

MacLeonard turned up his eyes and made a quick expressive gesture with one hand, as though he were pushing something.

"My God! Did you ever see anything like it? Why they *come* I don't know. After all, it costs them sixpence! But the funny thing is, you can never *tell* in these small towns. Well, for instance, last night in *Fauntleroy* you could have heard a pin drop. *Othello's*

risky, but sometimes it goes marvellously. I'm afraid you didn't pick a very good night?"

"It seemed tremendously good to me," said Charles, "and the way you coped with the audience—I was full of admiration."

"How *nice* of you," said MacLeonard warmly. "Heavens, what am I thinking of?—*do* sit down." He gathered his dressing-gown together with one hand and reached behind him for a chair.

"Oh, please don't bother," said Charles. "I was rather hoping to see Miss Oram. . . . I suppose she's dressing?"

"Eileen?" MacLeonard threw back his head and studied Charles's face with an expression of affection. "So *that's* where I've seen you before. I knew I had. With Eileen! Though for the moment I stupidly didn't remember your name." He made an airy gesture with one hand in front of his forehead. "My memory's *shocking*." He looked round quickly to make sure that the other men were sufficiently dressed, and tied the girdle of his dressing-gown. "Eileen darling," he called in a rich voice, "here's a friend to see you."

"For me? Who is it?" said Eileen's voice behind the curtain.

"Come out and see," said MacLeonard, glancing archly at Charles, and evidently prepared to go to any lengths rather than admit that he had no idea who he was.

"Coming!" called Eileen cheerfully, and bustled about audibly behind her curtain.

Charles coughed, and tried to seem at ease, but his heart was beating painfully, and he was aware that MacLeonard, ostensibly combing his eyebrows, was examining him curiously in the mirror.

"Eileen's a lovely Desdemona, isn't she?" said the actor suddenly, as though he had sensed a peculiar strain and was kindly trying to ease it by conversation. "She's too good for them, really. A house like that leaves one a nervous wreck."

"I'm sure it does," said Charles, gratefully meeting MacLeonard's eyes in the mirror and trying not to watch the cotton curtain. But he was aware without looking that Eileen had come out, and with an eager anxious face turned to meet her.

She was edging slowly between the chairs and hampers, tying a green scarf round her neck in an absorbed way and looking down at the knot. She had combed her hair carelessly and her face was very pale, as though she had dressed sketchily for going home and

had not bothered with make-up. She looked up as she finished tying the knot and hesitated, staring at him with a half-smile of greeting arrested on her face. The expression of her eyes was quite blank for a moment, and then looked frightened.

"Hello," said Charles in a croaking voice, and cleared his throat.

Eileen came quickly to the back of MacLeonard's chair and laid her hand on it.

"Charles," she said.

They stared at one another in incredulous silence, and then both began to smile. Charles felt his smile spreading and spreading idiotically, and he could see that Eileen, too, was shaken with joy and unable to control her face. They went on smiling and smiling in a trance of mutual recognition and delight, and then Eileen shook her head and laughed uncertainly, and put her hand up to her cheek.

"Forgive me for laughing. . . . It's just surprise! You're the last person . . ." She turned to MacLeonard, who was watching them with sympathetic interest in the mirror. Her face had flushed faintly pink with excitement and her eyes were shining. "Imagine it, Mac! I haven't seen . . . this particular person for ten years, and the last time was in—where was it, I wonder?" She looked at Charles again, holding the back of MacLeonard's chair with both hands, and still smiling, but this time he saw something different in her expression, and the change sobered him.

"It was in London," he said.

"Of course. In London. Well, well!" She searched his face curiously, her grey eyes very wide open and friendly, but now telling him nothing. "And what in the world brings you to Ennistymon?"

"I'm having a holiday," said Charles, "and I saw a playbill in the hotel and came to see you."

"What a stroke of luck! For me, I mean. I hardly ever see a soul I know in these parts." Her eyes left his face for a moment and glanced beyond him. "Who's with you, though? You're not alone?"

"Yes, I am. I had Miriam with me for a bit, but she's gone back now."

"Oh yes, Miriam. I expect she's quite grown up now, isn't she?"

"She's nearly as tall as I am."

"Good heavens, how perfectly astonishing. I wish you'd brought her."

"I had her with me at Blackstone. We had tea with your aunt."

"Oh yes, of course! She wrote to me. But I never expected to see you here, somehow."

"I didn't decide to come, until yesterday. I was in Dublin."

"Well . . . how nice," said Eileen pleasantly, and glanced at MacLeonard in the mirror. He had been watching them all this time with benevolent intentness, and now reached a hand behind him and gave Eileen a light smack.

"Darling, I want to get dressed. Spare my blushes. Take your friend outside and persuade him to come back to the digs and have a drink with us."

"I will," said Eileen. "You two have met, though, haven't you? I thought, as you were so busy talking . . ."

"Of course we've met," said MacLeonard. "I remember him perfectly well."

Eileen glanced quickly at Charles and smiled, and they went out of the dressing-room together and into the empty theatre. She sat down casually in the front row, folding one leg beneath her, and leaned her elbow on the back of her chair.

"Mac's such a dear," she said. "He's such a nice person to be working with. We all love him."

Charles looked at her questioningly as he sat down, but there was no intimacy of response in the wide-open thickly fringed grey eyes; only a pleasant friendliness; not even curiosity. He took out his cigarette case and offered it to her, but she shook her head.

"Do you still not smoke, then?"

"I still don't."

He took one out for himself and lit it, aware of her considering gaze and embarrassed because his hand was visibly shaking.

"I went to Blackstone," he said, dropping the match with care and putting his foot on it, "because I wanted to see you. I thought you might be there."

"Yes, Aunt Edith told me. I'm afraid you didn't have an awfully gay reception."

"Do you share her feelings on the subject?" said Charles, meeting her eyes again and smiling defensively.

"I? Good heavens, no. Aunt Edith's a very sympathetic person, but she's very religious, as you may have noticed. I'm sorry if she was harsh, but she'd only see it, you know, as her sacred duty. I expect she liked you very much, really."

Charles let his eyes rest for a moment on her short untidy curls, which were exactly as he remembered them, and on her smooth forehead and strong beautiful eyebrows, and then was caught again in the clear noncommittal gaze, coolly friendly and strangely disconcerting.

"I can't tell you how wonderful it is to see you again," he said, and gently took the hand which was lying in her lap.

"Yes, isn't it?" she agreed, with unmistakably the wrong sort of warmth in her voice. She did not withdraw her hand, but let it stay where it was, lying lightly in his with an air of impartial politeness.

Charles looked down at the slender hand and stroked the back of it gently with his thumb, but her lack of response was too obvious to be ignored, and presently he loosed it with a faint sigh and went on smoking.

"What did your aunt tell you?" he said at length, flicking some ash on the floor and frowning at it.

"Oh dear, I forget. Her letters are always rather wild. But she's a darling, don't you think? How did you like Blackstone?"

"Did she tell you I wanted to find you?" said Charles doggedly, determined, though with sinking heart, to make her stop playing this game of light conversation.

"Yes," said Eileen. "I do wish I'd been there. Your old friend Geoffrey turned up suddenly, earlier in the summer. Did he tell you? It was thrilling seeing him again."

"I'm afraid you're not very thrilled at seeing me."

"Oh, but I am! It's wonderful. How long are you staying here?"

Charles looked at her miserably.

"Do we have to talk like this?"

"Like what?"

Her eyes smiled, but he thought he detected a shadow of nervousness in them.

"Well, like strangers. I've been trying to find you for so long, and now I have, and you talk to me as though we'd only just met."

Eileen glanced down at her hands, considering, and then looked at him with a faint smile, in which he clearly saw determination not to be drawn into any admission of intimacy.

"Well, my dear . . . I don't know what to say. I'm honestly very pleased to see you. Did I seem unfriendly? It's the surprise, I expect. I haven't recovered my breath."

"Look here," said Charles, "can't we talk somewhere? There's so much I want to say to you."

"Yes, of course. We'll be going over to Mac's in a minute." She glanced over her shoulder at the door.

"But there'll be other people there."

"Oh, yes. But they're awfully nice. I'm very fond of them."

The dressing-room door opened and MacLeonard came out, dressed for the street and looking well-groomed and prosperous. He was followed by a small fair woman of indeterminate age, carrying a parcel, and by the tall strong-featured pleasant-looking woman who had played Emilia, and who, when she had made the announcement or spoken the prologue before the play, had dismayed Charles so much because he had mistaken her for Eileen. Seeing her now, in a loose overcoat and without stage make-up, he realised that there was not a vestige of resemblance; the illusion had been created by her stage disguise and by his own blind eagerness. Eileen got up at once when they appeared and slipped past them into the dressing-room.

"Ah!" said MacLeonard, smacking his hands convivially together and rubbing them, "sorry to keep you waiting so long." He slipped a hand through the arm of the woman carrying the parcel. "I don't think you know my wife? This is a friend of Eileen's, Mr. . . ."

"Denham," said Charles.

MacLeonard snapped his fingers like a conjuror, as though the name had been all along on the tip of his tongue and now was captured successfully.

"Denham! Of course. So stupid of me." He turned to the taller woman. "Hildegarde, this is Mr. Denham. Miss Hildegarde Strachey, one of our most shining lights."

Charles murmured and smiled, and the little group moved together up the side of the hall in the direction of the door. As they

passed out into the dark street Eileen silently joined them, buttoning her coat, and slipped her hand through the arm of the one they had called Hildegarde. Charles found himself walking between MacLeonard and his wife, while the other two walked behind at a little distance, talking together in low voices and separated from him by the darkness. He was so acutely conscious of Eileen's presence, so distracted by his own anxiety and the strain of trying to hear what she was saying, that he found MacLeonard's conversation difficult to follow, and made several random and confused replies during the short walk between the theatre and the lodgings.

"We're very humbly accommodated here," said MacLeonard, opening a front door on the main street, a little way beyond the post office, "but it suits us better, both from convenience and purse, than any of the hotels, so you must forgive. Repertory companies can't stay at *your* hotel, alas, much as I should like to. But they understand late hours here, night as well as morning, and look after us very well. On the whole we're very comfortable."

There was a delicious aroma of frying bacon in the house, and MacLeonard led the way upstairs to a small sitting-room, furnished with stuffy comfort and execrable taste, where there were sandwiches, cake, hard-boiled eggs and a pot of tea set out on a clean white cloth on a little table. Mrs. MacLeonard disappeared at once into an adjoining room, which Charles supposed to be a bedroom, and her husband looked over the contents of the table with a tolerant air, in the role of one who is man of the world enough to make the best of everything.

"Not *quite* the same as the Savoy Grill," he said pleasantly, waving a well-kept hand at the modest collation and taking a piece of bread and butter, "but we can't ask them to stay up to cook us a hot meal, and yet we all get infernally hungry. Now, I'm not going to offer you a cup of tea. I've got something better than that." He went, eating his bread and butter, to a small cupboard, unlocked it, and took out a bottle of whisky and several glasses. "This is Irish whisky, I'm afraid, but perhaps you're used to it? I never drink it myself, so I can't lay claim to being a connoisseur."

"I like it very much," said Charles, who had gone to stand with his back to the empty fireplace, and was watching the door.

Eileen came in with Hildegarde, gave him a clear bright smiling

glance and walked hungrily to the table, unbuttoning her coat.

"Hard-boiled," she said, "my favourite," and took a peeled egg in her fingers.

Charles gave her an urgent look, begging her to come to him, but she sat on the arm of a chair near the table, beside Hildegarde, and began eating her egg with calm absorbed attention. His heart sank, for her action clearly said that she meant to avoid him. He sat down gloomily on the sofa with his glass, and MacLeonard, who had poured out tea, came and joined him.

"Tell me," he said, "have you ever been to a show in a town like this before? What did you think of it? Do you think they got *anything* out of it, or was it all a fizzle? You can tell so much better than we could, being out in front."

"I thought there was a lot of genuine response," said Charles, tearing his eyes away from Eileen and making an effort. She was drinking her tea and not looking at him, and the sweep of her dark lashes lowered on her cheek made his heart ache.

"Now it's interesting, very, that you should say that," said MacLeonard, "because it's what I always maintain, and why I insist on giving some Shakespeare in every season. They *think* they're going to like *East Lynne* and *Fauntleroy* best, and *Dracula* draws, perhaps, the best of all; but when you *give* them Shakespeare they come to it *fresh*, without any preconceived ideas, and that, you know, is worth a very great deal. Of course," he went on, stirring his tea, "there's always that dreadful corner-boy element to contend with, and tonight they were particularly bad. (I'm sorry you happened to strike such a bad night.) But all the same, there *are* occasions when the response is perfectly amazing. They take every line, they get something out of the language which a modern audience misses, they even think the Elizabethan jokes are funny."

"I think they're devils," said Eileen suddenly, reaching across the table to take a sandwich.

"So they are," said Hildegarde, in a deep good-humoured voice, "but it all depends on what part you're playing. They're hell for Desdemona, because she has to appear in bed, and say things like, 'Will you come to bed, my lord?' They'd rather die than let that pass without a yell."

"Oh, that line!" said Eileen, with agony, "I always begin to feel

sick at least ten minutes beforehand. I lie there in bed, mentally covering them with a machine-gun."

"And you need it," said Hildegarde. "But Emilia has quite a good time, and so does Iago." She turned to Charles. "Didn't you notice? Iago never had any trouble at all, because they understood him. Perhaps they have one like him in every village, or think of him as an Ulsterman or something. I don't know; but that's the impression one gets. No villainy of Iago's is too much for them to swallow, and so he never has a bad moment from start to finish, and doesn't even have to do like Mac, and employ terror tactics."

"Oh, Mac's tactics are wonderful," said Eileen, her face lighting up suddenly with her old gaiety. "I always breathe a sigh of relief when he comes on, because I know he'll whip them into shape in no time. It's sheer blackmail, of course. I don't know what they *think* he'll do to them if they don't behave, but they have an uncomfortable feeling that he'll do *something*, and it sobers them like anything."

"I believe they think I'll eat them," said MacLeonard, getting up and going to the table for a piece of cake. "It's the gold earrings and dark make-up."

"Ah no, it isn't," said Eileen, "because it always works, whatever part you're playing. It's just hypnotism."

"One thing you said just now was very interesting," said Charles, bouncing slightly as MacLeonard sat down again on the sofa, "you said they responded to the poetry in a way that a modern audience didn't. You implied that they aren't a modern audience, and of course they're not, and that was one of the things that struck me during the play. I got a queer feeling that I was sitting among Elizabethans, and that they were absorbing the story, and even hearing the puns, for the first time."

"But that's it *exactly!*" said MacLeonard, laying his hand with enthusiasm on Charles's knee. "That's what I mean when I say that these innocent audiences—*repulsive* as they are on occasion—are sometimes better worth while than even Dublin or London. Their imaginations are *fresh*. And they still possess pure speech themselves, you see. Shakespeare's English doesn't strike them as anything out of the way. It's how they talk themselves, half of the time."

Presently, when he noticed Hildegard surreptitiously yawning, Charles got up and pointedly looked at his watch.

"Well, I mustn't keep you up any later," he said. "It's been delightful." He looked with significant enquiry at Eileen, and saw that she was watching him intently, her grey eyes curiously brilliant and her face very pale and still. (It isn't possible, he thought, that she's just going to let me walk out of here, without making a sign?) She did not move, and he could not interpret her expression.

"Ah no, don't go yet," said MacLeonard. "We never go to bed early. It isn't often we have the chance of a party in a place like this." He seemed genuinely disappointed by the breaking up of the talk, but Charles found himself unable any longer to bear the farce of conversation, and was determined somehow or other to get Eileen away. It was impossible to part like this, with nothing said.

"No, I must go," he said. "It's very late, and I know how tired you all are." He looked at Eileen, who still said nothing, and was crouching rather dejectedly on the arm of her chair. "Where are you staying, Eileen?" he said. "Let me take you home."

She roused herself and gave him a friendly smile.

"Oh, I'm staying here," she said. "Hildegard and I have a room about as big as that table, with a wonderful double brass bedstead which rattles like castanets whenever we move."

There was an awkward little silence, and MacLeonard carefully looked at neither of them.

"Eileen darling," he said, "you'll have to guide Mr. Denham down those dangerous stairs." He turned blandly to Charles. "They turn all the downstairs lights off as soon as we get in, and as none of us ever has a torch it's practically murder. I'd show you down myself if it weren't for the risk of breaking my highly insured legs."

"What about mine, though?" said Eileen, but she got up with apparent cheerfulness, and went to the door.

Charles thanked MacLeonard for his hospitality and said good-night. He thought he detected an unamused and genuine sympathy in the experienced blue eyes as they shook hands, and was grateful for the older man's perception. Eileen had neither by word nor look since the moment of recognition betrayed anything more

than the most ordinary friendliness; but MacLeonard had been a witness of that moment, watching unobtrusively in his mirror, and the electric tremor of emotion had not escaped him.

Charles closed the door behind him, and stumbled after Eileen down the shadowy stairs. A bit of candle was burning in a saucer in the passage below, casting huge shadows upwards through the banisters and making a monstrous wavering pattern on the ceiling. She went down quickly without speaking, but Charles leaned down and caught her hand on the stair-rail and brought her to an abrupt standstill. She turned unwillingly, her lips parted and her shadowed face full of a strange dread.

"No," she said almost inaudibly, "no, please . . ."

"Eileen," he whispered imploringly, "you know why I've come. You *must* listen."

He was holding both her arms now, and had clumsily thrust her back against the banisters, as though he still feared she would try to escape. Her whole body was rigid with unwillingness, and they stood for a moment in silence, facing one another, and so close that he felt her light breath on his cheek.

"I can't let you go," he said, and put his arms round her and drew her closer still, and laid his cheek against hers. She did not resist, but stood still, as though in a trance, breathing quickly. Her cheek was warm, and the soft touch of her hair against his face, and the rigidity of her thin arms under her coat, filled him with unbearable tenderness, almost to tears. He bent his head and kissed her neck, very gently, imploring her without words. He could feel the wild beating of her heart, although she stood so still and made no sign, and suddenly, with a slight movement no more than a shudder or a sigh, she stirred in his arms and kissed him on the forehead with tremulous sadness, and raised a gentle remembering hand to his face.

They kissed again, now in deep earnest, with shaken breath, each silently pleading with the other, feeling time and resistance ebb away from them like slow pain, until nothing remained but the peaceful certainty that they were together again, and in one another's arms.

Presently he drew back a little to see her face, slipping his hand upwards to the curve of her head, stroking and supporting it with

the gesture he had longed for and feeling the warmth and weight of her skull against the palm of his hand. She opened her eyes slowly, and even in the deluding shadow he saw that they were full of tears. He drew her head against his shoulder and held it there, stroking the soft curls for comfort and resting his cheek against them.

At the sound of someone opening a door upstairs they broke guiltily apart, and went down hand in hand to the narrow passage. There, both searching for something to say, they kissed again, and then stood looking at one another in the candlelight, foolishly smiling and holding each other's hands.

"I was right to come, wasn't I?" said Charles in a low voice. "You knew I should find you?"

"Darling . . . no, I didn't think you would. But I hoped. I thought it was hopeless, but I did."

"Lovely Eileen." He lifted one of her hands and kissed the palm, smiling at her with his eyes. "How long have you known that I was looking for you?"

"Oh . . . I suppose I only knew from Aunt Edith's letter. But I thought, after that, that you'd given it up."

"But you hoped I hadn't? Do say you hoped I'd find you?"

"I don't know. I think I mostly hoped you wouldn't; but it unsettled me. I've been in such a queer state of mind all summer. Ever since I saw Geoffrey, I haven't had a moment's peace. I kept wondering if he'd tell you, and what you were thinking."

"He told me because I went to him to find out. It wasn't an accident. He was the only person I could think of who might know where you were."

Her eyes wandered lovingly over his face.

"What a miracle of luck," she said, smiling at him.

"So I went to Blackstone, but you'd gone by then, and your aunt wouldn't tell me where you were. So I went to your friends the Rovedinos next, and found out that you were back in Ireland."

"Good heavens," said Eileen, looking faintly startled, "how on earth did you know about *them*?"

"Your aunt mentioned them, before she knew who I was, and it's such an odd name, I managed to remember it."

"But they didn't know where I was," she said, her eyes big with

astonishment. "I didn't know myself until I got to Dublin, and fixed it up with Mac."

"No, I just came to Dublin and hunted," said Charles. "I'll tell you all about it presently, but it doesn't matter now. Look, can't you come back with me to the hotel? We can't talk here, and I've got so much to say. I haven't been able to get near you all evening." He held her at arm's length, suspiciously. "Tell me why you behaved so queerly, after the first moment? Until just now, I thought you were angry at seeing me."

"I was frightened."

"My darling, what at?"

"Oh . . . everything. You've been in my mind so, and yet it was such a shock. I'd been thinking of nothing else for weeks, and making resolutions."

"What kind of resolutions?"

"Not to behave like this, if you did come," said Eileen, smiling.

"Come back to the hotel," said Charles, kissing her.

"No, of course I can't. Do you know how late it is?"

"I don't care. How can it possibly matter?"

"Well, they'll all be in bed for one thing, except probably one wretched servant who's having to wait up for you. It wouldn't be a bit comfortable, or sensible."

"Well then, let's go and walk about, and lean over the bridge. I can't leave you now. I'm never going to leave you again."

"Darling, you must. We'll talk in the morning. We'll go out all day if you like; there isn't a rehearsal. But I *must* go now, because of keeping Hildegard awake. I'm so tired tonight, I shall do nothing but dither. I should like to cry as it is."

"So should I," said Charles, and kissed her face. "I'm frightened to leave you, in case you've disappeared by morning. Will you promise not to?"

"I will indeed."

"You disappeared once before, you know." He took her chin in his hand and looked at her gravely.

"That was a long time ago. I shan't again."

"How early can I come in the morning?"

"As early as you like. Nine o'clock, perhaps? Have you got a car?"

"No. Couldn't I get one here, though, at the hotel?"

"I'm sure you could. You could ask them to put up a picnic, too, and we could go out all day."

"I will," said Charles. "I'll come at nine o'clock, and we'll go wherever you say. Only it must be somewhere where I can talk to you in peace."

"It shall be. I know the very place."

"On that condition, then, I'll go now, though I don't want to."

He took her by the shoulders and kissed her again, then looked intently into her eyes, strangely large and brilliant in the exhausted face.

"You do love me, Eileen? I want to get it clear."

"I do. I always have."

"No reservations?"

"None."

"That's a promise, then," he said. "My dear, dear love. Good-night."

8. At ten o'clock next morning Charles drove over the bridge and past the post office, looking for the house. Seen by daylight, in a pervading rain, the street was desolate and unfamiliar, and added to the worry of being late was the uncertainty of finding the right door, for now they all looked disconcertingly alike, equally modest, strange and uncommunicative. He stopped the car outside a chemist's shop and got out, scanning the upstairs windows and wondering how he could have been such a fool, the night before, as to walk away without noticing the number of the house or even its position.

In a moment, however, a door opened a little further down the street and Eileen had waved her hand and was coming quickly, her scarf fluttering and her head bent stiffly against the rain. He hurried to meet her, smiling with relief, and took her hands.

"Darling, I'm late. They took so long putting up the lunch and producing the car, I nearly came without. And *then* I didn't know the number of the house. I was just getting in a panic."

"I could see you were," said Eileen, laughing, "I was watching from a window."

They got into the car, hurrying to escape the rain, and Eileen brushed her hand upwards over her hair, in which the fine drops were caught as in a cobweb, and rubbed her wet hand on her stocking.

"How nice our tweeds smell," she said, and sat smiling at him.

"Let me look at you," said Charles, taking both her hands again.

"Do you realise I haven't seen you in daylight for ten years?"

"Oh dear. I suppose it's a shock."

He kissed her, tasting the cold rain on her cheek.

"I never saw you look so lovely. You've changed a bit, you know; you're even nicer than I remembered. I can't quite think what the difference is, but I like it."

"You haven't changed," she said, looking him over with fond appreciation. He gazed at her eyes, noticing the yellow flecks in the grey iris, iridescent as a butterfly's wing, and then found that they were laughing at him, very wide-awake and delighted and just a shade embarrassed.

"Sorry, I can't help staring at you. It's all so incredible. Where are we going?"

"Shall I tell you, or shall we just go there? The rain'll stop presently. I think it's going to be a wonderful morning." She glanced at him doubtfully. "You don't know this part of the country, do you? Or have you been here before?"

"Never. I'm entirely in your hands."

"Good. Then I can provide a dramatic surprise." She peered through the streaming windscreen, slightly frowning. "We start off this way. I'll tell you the turnings as we come to them."

Feeling absurdly happy and confident Charles started the car, and drove off with a slow swish of tyres over the puddles and down the empty, rain-blotched street. When they came to a crossing Eileen silently indicated the way with a long finger, and they drove out of the little town by way of a steep hill and then along a flat uninteresting green-edged road which looked as though it were prepared to go on for ever.

Presently he glanced sideways at her face, and received a faint shock from its serious expression. She was gazing straight ahead, unsmiling, the austere lines of her forehead and slender neck held steadily in profile and uncommunicative. The smiling excitement of their morning meeting had mysteriously faded: something was troubling her. He took one hand from the wheel and felt for hers, lying passive and still damp on her tweed lap.

"Happy?" He threaded his warm fingers between her cold ones, and gently clasped them.

She turned her face to him quickly with a smile, and from the

momentary warmth in her grey eyes he felt comforted: but the blaze had died down in them even before she had turned away again, and again he felt a touch of apprehension. She was keeping something back. There was something sad and hostile in the atmosphere, working against him.

"Darling? Is anything the matter?"

"No! Why?"

Her eyes were themselves again, candid and friendly, the thick lashes raying out around them in wideawake enquiry.

"I thought you seemed rather subdued, all of a sudden."

"I was trying to remember the road. Look, we turn off to the right here, at the next turning."

"Are you still pleased to see me?"

"Good heavens, what a question!" She turned her head slightly to him and laughed, her eyes flashing the friendly reassuring searchlight beam of which only they were capable. Other people merely looked at one, it seemed: but Eileen's eyes, when she was moved, made blazing contact. It was like a physical touch, reviving and endearing.

"But there's still something not quite right," he said, giving her fingers a quick pressure and loosing them to change down, setting the car breasting noisily up a long uneven hill. He felt for her hand again and found it. "Darling, tell me what it is? I haven't slept all night with excitement, and it's left me in that queer state. . . . I feel I could see through walls, and hear what you're thinking."

"If you can, then," she said, suddenly sobered, "there's no need to ask. No, go on," she added quickly, as he slowed down the car, alarmed, and was looking at her. "We're nearly there. And I wasn't really thinking about anything." She seemed nervous, unwilling to broach the question that lay between them, and sad, too, in some hidden way that threatened him.

I don't care what it is, he thought stubbornly, stifling apprehension. Nothing can be allowed to prevent us now . . . nothing's big enough. He frowned slightly, pressing his foot down on the accelerator and roaring the car up the long rough gravelly road. Whatever it is, I shall wear it down. . . . There mustn't be anything.

"Here we are," said Eileen suddenly, in a cheerful voice. "Look,

you can turn in there, where the wall's broken. You can run in on the grass."

They seemed to be half-way up a long naked hill; the road ran straight ahead, steadily climbing, and the flat country they had left behind was spread out below them like a map on the right-hand side. To the left, where Eileen pointed, was a low broken wall of loose stones, and beyond it the cap of the hill rising in steep turfy contours, minutely flowered, criss-crossed with sheep-tracks, ambiguous, empty.

He turned the car in on the soft turf and looked at her enquiringly.

"Is this really where you wanted to come?"

"Yes. You'll see."

She was smiling now in a confident, coaxing way, obviously with something up her sleeve. Her face was gay and serene, as he had remembered it. Perhaps it was going to be all right, after all.

They got out of the car and looked about them. The rain had stopped now, and the grey morning sky, hanging low over the hill, was beginning to dissolve and soften from within with a diffused, steamy warmth. The grass was grey with moisture, like a mown lawn drenched with dew and still untrodden, and the air, flowing in giddy waves of changing weather, was strong as brine with the blown breath of the sea. Soon the sun would come out, and everything would be steaming.

"Where's the lunch?" said Eileen, looking pleased and excited.

"Here, in this basket. Are you going to make me walk far?"

"Just over the top of the hill. I'll help you carry it if it's heavy."

"My dear girl, I'm not quite decrepit yet."

It was all right. The adventurous, picnic atmosphere had reasserted itself, and soon they would be alone together in some place that she knew, with the basket sitting importantly in the grass, and the day before them. The old perfect intimacy had returned mysteriously, in a flash, unheralded, so that they found themselves smiling at one another for no reason, as though a forgotten tune had begun to play for both of them, carelessly driving before it all discords and anxieties.

They set off together up the turfy slope, walking quickly with

long steps and dreamlike ease, the smell of warm grass and thyme rising all about them.

"Mushroom weather," said Eileen, and stooped for a second to snatch a small pale gleaming button from under a tight lace of grass. She peeled it with rapid fingers as she walked, and ate it with an air of hungry unconcern, glancing about for more.

In a few minutes they came round the sudden shoulder of the hill and stepped over a broken wall. There was a vast and clamorous crying of seabirds somewhere in front of them, but whether near or far it was difficult to tell. It sounded like millions of voices blended into one endless, melancholy, distant scream, and Charles looked about him with surprise, for there were no birds to be seen. Only, to the right, a handful of rooks rose up from what might have been a toy ruin, a child's tower—or was it really a proper size, only a long way off? All his perspectives dissolved and became unreal as he looked at it, tiny and perfect and solitary on the breast of the hill, with the black birds idly sailing above it like fragments of blown tinder thrown up from a chimney.

"I believe we're coming to the sea," he said, changing the heavy basket to the other hand.

Eileen laughed.

"Look," she said, and pointed to the empty space of sky which suddenly confronted them.

The hill ended abruptly, a little beyond some rotten posts and a strand of barbed wire. They stepped over it and on to the bare rock beyond before Charles saw with any completeness what had happened. They were on the edge of the most tremendous cliffs he had ever imagined, stretching away in gigantic jutting sweeps to left and right, dramatic, nightmarish, incredible, with the wrinkled skin of the sea so far below that he stopped with a gasp, and involuntarily put out his hand and caught hold of her arm.

"There, you see?" she said, smiling up at him, pushing back the hair from her forehead with a delighted gesture. "Didn't I say I'd got a surprise for you?"

She made a movement to free her arm and go on, but Charles, shocked into panic by the height, had a moment of sweating fear and pulled her back roughly.

"Eileen! Please! I shall be sick if you go to the edge! Darling, don't go, even for fun! I can't stand it."

"All right," she said mildly, and stood still, breathing the salty air with pleasure and looking about her.

Charles put down the basket, still holding her with one hand, and felt for his handkerchief.

"It's certainly a surprise, all right," he said, wiping his brow. "Don't move. I'm a fool about heights. My knees are trembling."

"I won't move," she said, and put her arm through his. Presently they both began to laugh, and he put his arms round her with giddy suddenness and kissed her.

"You *must* come to the edge," she said, leaning away from him. "Even if you do it on your hands and knees. It's worth it."

"No. No. Wild horses couldn't drag me."

"Yes, they could. Please try."

"No. I should begin to rave. I should push you over."

"No you wouldn't. We'll sit down, look, on the rock, and do it by degrees. Darling, please! This is what we've come for."

"Oh no, it isn't," said Charles with decision, but at the same time he had a flash of superstition, and began to move unwillingly forward, a step at a time, holding her back by the arm. If I go to the edge and look over . . . once . . . everything will be all right. This is the test. I have to go to the edge of that stone table . . . once . . . we must look over together.

They went out gingerly on the rocky shelf, feeling the weight go out of their bodies and the air eddying dangerously all about them. The crying of the invisible birds was deafening now, and there was a sighing undercurrent, too, like distant surf, but so tiny and far away that he sickened at it.

A yard from the edge Eileen took his hand and sank gently to her knees.

"Lie down," she said. "It's best."

They lay on their stomachs and wormed their way to the edge, which jutted as sudden, as flat and as final as the edge of a table. They looked over. The blood was singing in Charles's ears, and his sight was giddy for a moment with sheer nausea. He still held Eileen's hand in a pinching grip, and pressed his shoulder against her. The sea, the cliffs, the infinitesimal glittering cloud of birds

below them wheeled drunkenly sideways, sweeping upwards and away from the corners of his eyes until the ledge began to rotate like a vast turntable. He closed his eyes quickly.

"It'll be all right in a minute," said Eileen comfortably, close to his ear, and he pressed her hand gratefully, holding fast to the physical contact.

Presently the cliff slowed down and came to a standstill. He opened his eyes. Far, far below them—too far away to be real—the wrinkled sea was breaking in fine slow threads of white at the foot of the cliffs. The cliff-face swept under and away in pleated ridges, in inward-sloping surfaces, in shadows which might have been caves, and then out again into blackly silhouetted promontories round which the sea was closely, motionlessly drawn. An indigo shadow filled the hollow of the cliffs, but the cloud of sea-birds, seething and cross-threading ceaselessly below, was already touched by the indefinite sun, and glittered and dissolved in tiny motion like brilliant motes suspended in a beam of light.

Cautiously, Charles withdrew his gaze, and rested it on the pale curve of Eileen's cheek. Beyond it, on the turfy underbrim of the cliff, was a trembling fringe of harebells and fine grass. She was absorbed, forgetting him.

"Let's go back, where we can sit," he said.

She sighed.

"Look down at the ledges," she said. "Millions and millions of seabirds. A hidden world."

He focussed again, with an effort, and saw that the whole shadowed face of the cliff was alive, crowded in all its ledges and cranies with birds, white, black and white, grey, packed together like beads on a thread wherever there was foothold, and that the flying cloud was a rhythmical ceaseless traffic between the sunlit air and the ledges.

"I don't want to look any more," he said. "It makes the cliff move. I can feel it projecting further, with me on it."

"I like that feeling," she said, still gazing down. "D'you think it's a memory, in the bones, of what it felt like to sail confidently off those ledges, into an air current?"

"Certainly not. I don't believe it makes the birds feel sick, and I shall, if the cliff keeps moving forward like this."

She looked at him sideways, smiling.

"Let's go back, then. This isn't where I meant to sit at all. But I can never resist it."

They edged back carefully from the brink and stood up. Eileen picked up the basket and Charles's mackintosh, and walked away with them along the cliff, keeping close to the wire. The sun was now almost fully out, and her head and shoulders were touched with hazy brightness. Charles followed, bemused, the noise of the seabirds echoing confusedly in his ears and his legs feeling as though they belonged to someone else, and would like to stagger.

In a very few minutes the character of the cliff-top changed: grass grew right to the edge, which was no longer rocky, but crumbling, and the table-like surface broke into gentle irregularities, into grassy ups and downs and flowery hollows. Eileen went over a rounded bluff and disappeared, and when he came in sight of her again she was sitting in a sheltered hollow facing the sea, the mackintosh spread out beneath her and the basket at her back.

She looked round at him with a smile and waved her hand.

"This is the place," she called, and watched him as he came down the steep slope in a clumsy rush and dropped breathlessly beside her.

"This is better," he said, and picked up her hand and kissed it. A thought struck him. "What time is it?"

"I don't know. Eleven o'clock, perhaps?"

"The reason that basket's so heavy," he said, "is that there are two bottles of wine in it. I shall open one now."

"Oh, don't! We shall lose this lovely early morning feeling."

"That's partly my aim. I distrust this reckless tight-rope-walking mood you're in. I want you to sit still and be happy, and let me talk."

She shook her head faintly.

"The recklessness is only skin deep," she said, and looked away from him at the sea with the same sudden melancholy which had disturbed him in the car.

Charles patiently undid the basket, refusing to admit the feeling that he was again losing ground, and peeled the gold paper off the cork of the first bottle of champagne. He began to untwist the wire, and she turned with a little sigh and laid her hand on it.

"Darling, no, please. I . . . it's too much like our old celebrations." She seemed worried and sad, afraid of hurting him.

He looked down at her hand, stricken, the elation gone out of him like a breath. So now she's going to tell me what it is . . . why she won't . . .

He laid the bottle gently in the basket.

"Tell me what it is," he said. "I thought it *was* a celebration. I thought you knew why I'd come."

"I'm not sure."

"But last night, when I left you, you knew? There wasn't time to say much, but it all seemed so clear." He lifted doubtful, appealing eyes to her face. "Don't let's have any misunderstandings, for Heaven's sake. I've been trying to find you because I still love you, and I wanted . . . that is if you feel the same, I thought last night you did . . . I wanted us to do what we ought to have done ten years ago, and make a life together."

She looked at him doubtfully, a flicker of surprise widening her eyes for a moment, then turned her head away and stared at the sea.

"Has Isabella left you, then?" Her voice was remote.

"Not yet. She will when she knows. Oh, I know it sounds crude, darling, but it's got to be said. I'd got to find you first, to know whether there was still any chance. . . . For all I knew, you might have forgotten me, or be hating me. There wouldn't have been any sense in having all the uproar over again, until I knew if it was any use."

"I see," said Eileen. "So that if I didn't, you could go quietly back again, and nothing said."

"Darling, it doesn't sound romantic, I know. But what's the good of upsetting everybody, if nothing's to come of it? But if you do still love me . . . if you can be happy with me, everything can be made to come right. It's worth anything."

Eileen was silent for a long time, staring at the sea. Then she frowned and drew up her knees, and clasped her arms round them.

"But it's been such a long time," she said. "I don't see how it's happened."

"It happened quite suddenly and simply, a few weeks ago. Isabella found some of your letters, and burned them: and something

happened to me. . . . I can't explain it. But I suddenly knew that I'd wanted you all the time—that I couldn't bear not knowing what had happened to you. And the thing grew and grew, until I made up my mind to try again. I knew it was my fault that it'd been a failure before, but I thought, it can't happen twice. I hadn't much hope. I thought you were certain to be married, or at least . . . not interested any more. But I was determined to find out, and ask you. . . . And last night everything seemed so perfect suddenly. I thought you were sure, too. I couldn't sleep for joy."

"I didn't sleep either," said Eileen, with the ghost of a smile. "And I don't suppose I shall tonight." She sighed.

Charles sat up suddenly, making the basket creak.

"Darling, what *is* it? Did you say what you said last night, out of politeness? Or what? Are you hiding something which makes the whole thing a farce? I must know."

"I'm not hiding anything," she said. "But . . . I don't think you know, at all, what it's been like. I can't just snap back into the person I was, ten years ago. I can't face it again."

"Darling, there won't be anything. I shall do the facing. What is it you can't face?"

"I don't know. I *can't* go through it again," she said on a desperate note, and turned her face defensively further away from him.

"Only tell me one thing," said Charles patiently. "Was it true, when you said last night that you still loved me? That you always had? It's more than I'd dared to hope, but you did say it? Wasn't it true?"

Eileen rubbed her eyes with her knuckles, and sat blinking.

"I suppose it was true," she said. "I think it was. It was so tremendous seeing you, I don't think I really knew what I was saying. One can't suddenly know that a thing's white, after ten years of making oneself believe that it's really black. It's too confused. I think the only thing I really knew was that I was frightened. I still am."

"Of what?"

"Of being made to go through the whole damned hoop again," she said in a small voice, and laid her head on her arms.

Charles put his arm round her shoulders and drew her gently down until she was lying beside him.

"Haven't you ever forgiven me?" he said, his mouth against her hair. "I don't deserve to be forgiven, perhaps, but it wasn't all my fault. If you hadn't disappeared like that it might still have been all right. Given time."

She shook her head.

"But don't you see, that that was just what I couldn't give it? I knew how it was going to be, and I couldn't bear it any longer. There was a breaking point. And I suppose there was pride, too, in those days, and I saw so clearly how they were all managing it. . . ." She looked blankly beyond his ear, not seeing him, remembering. "It seemed the only thing that could save me, somehow. And of course I regretted it. When I got to Ireland I thought I wasn't going to be able to bear that either. But when I was just beginning to hesitate, there was that letter . . . and then I saw it was all turning out just as I knew it would. So it was really the only thing I could have done, after all. . . . And you never wrote."

"Darling, I didn't know where you were," he said plaintively. "If you'd given me the smallest sign . . . But what could I think, except that you were fed up and disgusted? As you'd every right to be. But I never knew anything about Sybil's letter until a few weeks ago. You didn't think she wrote it with my knowledge?"

"What else could I think?" she said, lying back against his arm and looking up at him. "That was all that came. You never wrote yourself."

"Darling, how could I? I didn't know where you were."

"Isabella's mother found out where I was. You've found me now. It would have been easier then."

Charles put his face down to hers and kissed her remorsefully.

"I know. I didn't try. I felt defeated." He kissed her again, coaxing, dumbly asking to be forgiven, and when at last her arm crept round his neck he sighed, and lay for a long time with his cheek against her forehead, listening to her breathing.

Presently he said, without moving, "Tell me what it's been like for you, all this time."

"I can't," she said, turning her face away. Presently she said, "It was like a long illness, dragging on in secret. I nearly died of it."

He felt a pang of pity, and ached inwardly.

"Tell me, though. I want to know. I don't want there to be anything we don't know about one another."

She turned her head and looked at him consideringly, without reserve. Then she sat up and looked for a while at the sea, and finally twisted round and lay on her stomach, propping herself on her elbows and threading her fingers thoughtfully into the grass.

"I don't see why I shouldn't tell you," she said, plucking a long stalk and tying a knot in it. "I want to know about you, too. Because you must have changed. One becomes a different person in ten years. I know I have."

"How, different? You seem the same person to me. There's everything there that I love. Everything I'd forgotten and remembered."

Eileen smiled faintly and tied another knot.

"It's quite an effort to remember what I was like. I'm much nastier now, I think. If I were to live that time over again I should behave quite differently. Rather like Isabella, in fact. I should hang on and make scenes. I might even have got you away from her at last."

"I wish you had."

"Yes, but you see, one's so different at twenty-four. One has the feeling that life goes on for ever, and it produces the most infernal pride. One thinks in terms of clean breaks and starting afresh. One despises all forms of compromise. . . . It's just ignorance, of course. You don't realise how everything's changing you all the time, and that according to how you act now, you're deciding the sort of person you're going to be." She threw her knotted grass away, and plucked another. "No, it's really much more complicated than that. Acting nobly, for instance, doesn't necessarily make one a noble person. Very often the contrary. Because one so often regrets it afterwards, when it's too late, and then the most awful disintegrating processes set in. You know . . . when I went off like that, and disappeared, I felt absolutely buoyed up by despair and pride. It felt at the time as though it would carry me through, as though I *must* emerge . . . after all, I'd been in love before once or twice, and it hadn't done me any harm. And I remember really believing it was a comfort to know that it was me you loved, not Isabella. I thought I'd only got to remember that,

and it would brace me up for life. . . ." She laughed, and moved her fingers about in the grass. "Whereas, of course, a belief like that just corrodes you after a time. And then you stop believing it. And then you begin to realise how damnably slow these emotional processes are . . . how they damage you, in the course of years, like an illness."

She frowned, intent on plaiting some growing grasses together. Charles watched her fingers with painful attention, his face constricted.

"How has it damaged you?" he said quietly, not daring to look at her.

"Oh, I dare say I'm all the better for it in lots of ways. It isn't tragic. It is, of course, for an impossibly long time, but one can't go on feeling at that pitch for ever, and after a while the thing recedes a bit, leaving everything quite empty, you know, but you find you're going on pretty much as usual. And then, when you're getting wonderfully smug and thinking you're over it, there's a relapse—much worse than anything you've had before. It's then that the really bad period begins. Or so I found. All the details—all the pride and resentment and clean breaks and all the other unimportant nonsense—have had time to fade by then, and crumble away: and this time you're face to face, so to speak, with the bare rock."

She meditated, biting a dry stalk, and then turned and looked at him, with a flash of her old calm gaiety, smiling.

"There's something indecent in telling you all this, isn't there? I must say it's a relief. People who analyse their painful love-affairs to their friends can get to be a bore, but the instinct's a sound one. It develops a sort of resistance, I think: you get accustomed to the idea. I never did that: it was a pity. I turned madly secretive—even now I can't think why. I'm sure it would have been more wholesome if I could have brought myself to do a bit of open suffering, and confide in Aunt Edith."

"And couldn't you?"

"Oh no—*quite* impossible. I've never been able to tell her anything important, ever since I was a child. She means so well, she's such an unfailing rock of sympathy, and yet . . . somehow she always gets hold of the wrong end of the stick. Oh, you must have

seen, when you met her, that you can't tell her anything. She suffers so, and jumps to such mad conclusions. Of course, she had to know something about it, because of the letter, and naturally she jumped to the conclusion that you were a criminal. I told her as little as possible."

"Why did you show her the letter?" said Charles, frowning, his hatred of Sybil coming into his mouth like a taste.

"But I didn't! It was Aunt Edith she wrote to. Making certain, I suppose, that I shouldn't conceal my defeat even there, or get away with anything."

Charles grunted.

"She's a curious character, isn't she?" said Eileen, turning on her side and leaning on one elbow to look at him. "Have you ever found out what she's really up to? I was always deadly afraid of her. She rang me up once, you know, in London, in the thick of the struggle. I think it was the day before I decided to go away. She wanted to come and see me . . . pretended she was all on my side, you know—as if she could be! She was awfully persuasive. But I was frightened by then, and terribly up on my dignity, so I said no. I've often wondered since how she'd have gone about it. Offered me a cheque, perhaps?"

"She might, easily," he said, "just to humiliate you. She's much too close to offer money except to someone she was certain wouldn't accept it."

"Well, I didn't know. Whatever she meant to do, I couldn't have faced her. When I saw how things were going, I couldn't have faced anybody—except you. I was nourished on pride and despair, as I told you before."

Charles took her hand, clenched on a bit of grass, and gently opened her fingers.

"Don't be nourished on it now," he said. "It's too unwholesome."

"Oh, I couldn't do it now," she said, with a trace of bitterness. "One of the things I found, quite recently, was that I'd no pride left."

"It's a useless encumbrance," he said. "I haven't any either."

"Nor Isabella, even then," said Eileen. "She was much wiser than me. I used to say to myself, thinking of her, 'I should have more pride. I wouldn't hang on to a man who didn't love me.' But now

of course I see that she was clever. She put her pride in her pocket and hung on and made scenes. And naturally she won. The woman who makes the longest and loudest scenes always does. It's an interesting natural law; I've often observed it."

"It isn't a law," said Charles, "it's a fallacy. You say that out of bitterness: you don't really believe it."

"I am bitter, perhaps. I told you I'd changed. I used to have the most touching and stupid faith in humanity, especially myself. That's another thing that's gone, and now that I'm used to it, it's quite comfortable. In some ways it's more convenient. I don't mind a bit."

Charles loosed her fingers and sat up, feeling in his coat pocket for a cigarette.

"You're saying this to punish me," he said. "That's the only reality behind these bitter statements. They're quite justified. I don't want to make any defence." He lit his cigarette and threw the match away. It fell, blackened and curling, in a knot of grass, a little weazened mark of interrogation.

"Oh, *no*," said Eileen, dismayed. "I'm quite sure there's no craving to punish. I got over that years ago. I'll admit I had it, once. It would have soothed me, once, to hear that you were miserable with Isabella, or had gone off with someone else—no, not that exactly, that would have rubbed in my own failure a little *too* deep—but something of the kind: something painful. But that passed, in time, and I certainly don't feel it now. I got over that years ago."

She lay propped on one elbow, idly biting a stalk of grass, her eyes narrowed to thick double fringes against the brightening reflection of the sea.

"No . . ." she said at last. She glanced at him out of the corners of her eyes, faintly smiling. "What am I thinking of? The last thing I meant to do was to recriminate. I thought . . . we'll have just one day. That can't do any harm, after all these years. But *oh*, *can't it*? Something happened to me when you took that bottle out of the basket. It was all so . . . so pleasant and facile. I became nasty."

"I understand it," said Charles tonelessly. "You've every right."

"But I don't *want* to be nasty," she said. "I wanted, most frightfully, to have our day. And now I've done nothing but bleat, and

go over and over the old drama. All I meant to do, really, was to make you understand why I couldn't . . . why I can't . . ." She shook her head and pondered, gazing away from him at the shimmering horizon, where the smooth dark bulk of an island had risen up like a whale's back out of the breaking mist.

Charles gazed at her in dumb suspense, studying her face. What *was* it that gave it that subtle difference, that indefinable something which conferred, on Eileen's face, the look of a stranger? The purity of profile was not lost; the clear shining forehead, the calm considering eyes, the kindly mouth, the delicate uplifted curve of the nostril which always, always, in whatever face he found it, could be read as the clear sign of a passionate nature—all was there as he remembered, special to herself and mysteriously touching: and yet . . . there was something there which set a barrier between them, something he did not know.

She turned to face him with an impulsive movement, as though shaking off her thoughts, and confronted his puzzled frown with a smile from which the strangeness had suddenly vanished. She put her hand abruptly on his arm.

"I *can't* believe you're here," she said. "I *must* touch you." Her eyes dwelt incredulously on his face. "I haven't realised it yet, you know. That's what's the matter. And yet there you are, looking and even feeling just the same."

He threw his cigarette away and caught her hand before she could withdraw it.

"Darling? Why won't you try again? This is all nonsense. We're both the same, really."

"Yes, I know," she said quickly. "Too much the same, perhaps. It frightens me."

"But we won't be caught again. We're older and wavier. It's a thing that can't happen to the same people twice."

Eileen shook her head, looking down at their tightly clasped hands.

"I had an uncle once," she said, "he used to live at Blackstone with Aunt Edith when I was a little girl—"

"What's your uncle got to do with it? Don't try and evade me."

"I'm not. It's the same thing I'm trying to explain." She glanced

at him nervously and dropped her eyes again. "He started to go blind, a double cataract, and he had an operation. It was unspeakably painful, and he couldn't have an anaesthetic—I can't remember why. And after that he had to lie for weeks in a dark room, with his head fixed between sandbags. And after he'd gone through it all, bearing everything with the most dreadful fortitude, it turned out it was a failure. So then," she went on hurriedly, clasping and unclasping his hand, "the specialist said he must have the operation again, and it would probably succeed. Everybody said he ought to. But he couldn't face it. He remembered what it had been like, and he preferred to go blind. So he did. Now you see the point of the story. I feel exactly like that. I think he was right."

Charles sat up, still holding her hand.

"You mean," he said slowly, "that you don't think I can do it. You don't trust me. You think I'd let the same thing happen again."

"Darling, why wouldn't it? The whole thing's made me a coward. They were too much for you before: why shouldn't they be again?"

"Because I'm more desperate," he said, surprised at the oddly threatening note in his own voice. "Because I'm older, and tougher, and stonier hearted. Because nothing can stop me, if you don't. That's why."

She gazed at him distractedly, her lips parted.

"Listen," he said, gathering anger and obstinacy. "I know I'm a weak character. I know I failed you before. I've had ten years to find out my mistake. Darling, it *can't* happen again! Don't you *see* it can't? They triumphed over us once, but why should we be superstitious about them? They're not supernatural. For God's sake don't let's give them another bloodless victory."

"It wasn't bloodless before," said Eileen faintly, and he knew from her voice that the resistance was gone out of her.

"You don't really think any of the things you've been saying," he told her sternly. "You *know* it'll be all right. You're playing for time, or something. Or what is it?" He glanced sharply at her stricken face, and felt suddenly exhausted, drained of all strength and effort, longing only to drop his head on her breast in silence, and be at peace. The struggle was over and he knew it, but he felt

no elation. "Tell me what is it," he said, still holding her with a hard eye, accusingly.

She turned away from him with a sigh and hid her face in the grass.

"We must think," she said. "We must think. . . ."

"There isn't time. Don't you read the papers? Once war's declared, things are going to get hold of us . . . we shall be scattered . . . God knows if we should ever see each other again."

"Oh . . . *that*," said Eileen into the grass. Her voice sounded very far away.

There was a long silence.

Presently he said, "Isabella's already in a stew about going to California with the children, to be out of it. Sybil's over here, laying plans for us all. We're all to go to America and live under her wing until the danger's past. Or for good, perhaps, according to the way it goes. . . ." He heard his voice trailing on and on mechanically, when there was no need. If only she would give some sign. . . .

Eileen turned her head slightly on her arm and he saw one bright eye looking up at him with—no, impossible: but it *was*—the sidelong-glancing eye was brimming with laughter.

"Poor boy," she said in a muffled voice, her mouth hidden against the sleeve of her jersey. "You only just got to me in time, didn't you? What a narrow squeak."

He found himself surprised in a strained attitude, sitting bolt upright on his mackintosh, pompous, on the defensive, gazing warily down at her with a startled eye.

She was *laughing*. . . ?

Oh, then it was really over. Relax.

What on earth had this difficult struggle been about?

He collapsed with a grunt of relief, rolling over so that his head was against hers and her sleeve tickled his face. He flung an arm across her shoulders and lay still, inhaling the smell of the grass and the sun-warmed mackintosh.

The sun grew hot, and a vaporous warmth rose out of the grassy hill. The sea had deepened from a blinding pallor into

sweeping tracts of indigo and purple, on which the shallow island lay at anchor, a smooth bulk of shadowed grey and green. A mile away—two miles, perhaps, or three? the scale of the cliffs was so prodigious that distance became absurd—a handful of dark specks appeared, floating like tea-leaves on the surface: the Aran curraghs fishing.

Eileen stirred from her prone position and sat up, her face flushed and her hair pressed into flat crescents where her head had rested on her arm. She looked warm and vague, as though she had been asleep.

"I'm thirsty," she said, and looked with interest at the basket.

Together they lifted the lid, explored the folds of the covering napkin, took out the bottle and two glasses with ritual pleasure.

"It'll be warm," said Charles, growing rigid in his cautious efforts with the cork.

It came out with a sharp sucking report, and a thread of vapour escaped like a genie from the mouth of the bottle. The wine came gulping out into the glasses.

They held them up, sniffed, looked at one another with the consciousness that something memorable ought to be said, then smiled and drank in silence. The cool wine ran delicately down their throats and its golden effervescence tickled their noses. It was delicious.

Eileen set down her glass with a sigh and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Nectar," she said. "Who would ever have thought of drinking champagne on the Cliffs of Clare in the middle of the morning?" Presently she said, "What shall we do next? It feels so reckless, throwing the past away. Anything might happen." Her gaze rested tenderly on Charles, lying beside her in a trance of contentment, then flickered away from him to the sea and the island. "Look. The Aran Islands. There's a haven for us. Couldn't we go there and hide, among the happy islanders?"

He roused himself with sudden energy, feeling the need of her advice.

"Yes, we've got to decide all that. We must make plans. How soon can you get away from MacLeonard?"

"Oh, quite soon. The tour won't last more than another fortnight at the outside."

"A fortnight! But we can't wait that long. I shall have to go back to London at once, and settle everything. I can't do it unless you come with me. At least, I can, but I don't want to." He looked troubled, feeling the menace of unknown influences.

"A fortnight isn't long," she said. "I'd come over as quickly as I could, and join you in London."

"No. It won't do. I don't think you realise . . . I hardly dare look at the paper in the morning, in case it's already happened. I daren't listen to the radio in the hotel. We must get back before it starts, and get everything settled. I feel quite certain that anything else would be fatal. We should get separated. They might put a ban on all travelling. They're running hundreds of special evacuation trains out of London already. You don't know what it's like."

She looked puzzled and dubious, considering this.

"You don't think I'm talking nonsense, do you?" he said. "You don't imagine for a moment that there isn't going to be a war?"

Eileen lay back in the grass with a sigh and shaded her face with her arm.

"No," she said. "I've never had a second's hope that it wouldn't happen. I've tried to tell myself, nobody could be such fools. But of course they can and will. I wash my hands of them." She lay in silence for a minute, her eyes hidden by her arm. "Oh God," she said suddenly, with anger, "what a *bore* it's going to be. . . ."

"It's going to be much worse than a bore," said Charles sentimentously, but at the same time he felt a secret relief to hear her say it, expressing his own futile despairing resentment at the bad dream which was being so busily prepared and which would be clamped down and screwed like a coffin lid over the whole of life.

"Oh," said Eileen, flinging her arm out sideways into the grass, "what have we got to go *through*. . . ? I didn't care so much before: I've always been such a hopeless pessimist about that sort of thing . . . it's been coming closer for years, I always knew they meant to have it . . . they want to wallow in blood and I've always thought, well, blast them, *let* them, if they're such fools . . ."

"Who's 'they'?" said Charles, raising a superior eyebrow.

She gave him a sidelong look and made a vague airy gesture with her hands, beginning to laugh.

"Oh . . . just them, you know. The ones who always do everything. You know quite well who I mean."

She sat up with sudden apprehension, looking sober.

"Will they make you go into the army?"

"I don't know. Perhaps not. I'm over forty."

"What age did they go up to in the last war?"

"I don't remember. Over fifty, I think, towards the end."

"I wonder how long this one'll last? I wish we could go very far away until it's over. I suppose we couldn't?"

"That's Isabella's plan. I'd rather do something different." He began pulling up stalks of grass and arranging them in a pattern on the edge of the mackintosh. "But, you know, I don't think that sort of discussion's very profitable. Oddly enough, now that we're together, it doesn't seem nearly as frightening as it did."

"I think it's much more so."

"Well . . . that's the difference between us. You've become more afraid on my behalf—isn't that it?—but on the other hand I feel that now we're together we can face practically anything."

"We can face more, but we can suffer more," said Eileen. "However, that's not the point." She rubbed her eyes. "We want to make some plans quickly, while there's still time. When did you say Isabella was going to America?"

"I don't know. Almost at once, I think: before anything happens to stop her."

"Then why not stay here until she's gone? Wouldn't that make it comparatively painless?"

"Yes, if it could be done. I'm afraid it can't. In the first place, she wouldn't go; and in the second, you know, I'm afraid I really must go back and face it out. I shall have to tell her. I don't think one can announce a decision like that through the post."

"I should have thought you could, much better. Oh . . . it'll be *agony*! And they'll get you down. You see if they don't. I know what'll happen."

Charles shook his head.

"It's no use," he said. "It's got to be faced. Isabella's done me no

harm; it's not her fault; and I'm preparing to deal her the blow that she's been on the watch for almost ever since we were married. I shall have to go back and tell her, as reasonably as I can. It can't be done any other way."

"Oh, no! I think you're so wrong. It won't make it any easier, or less painful, having one last gigantic scene. And her mother there as well! How can you possibly dare?"

"I must," he said stubbornly. "Darling, you know what'd happen if I did it by letter. There'd be frantic telegrams and appeals, and I'd have to go back and go through it in the end. Besides, there's the practical aspect. There's money to be arranged, and the house, and the children . . . oh, a million things. Don't let's talk about it. It's got to be done, and I'll do it, and I shall deserve all the unpleasantness, I dare say. Now let's talk about something else."

Eileen consulted his face, and detected obstinacy.

"Oh well, if you think it's the only way," she said. She looked unhappy.

After a pause she said, "How much is Isabella going to mind?"

"I don't know. Quite a lot, I expect. It can't be helped now, can it?"

"I don't know . . ." she said helplessly: and then, with sudden vehemence, "no, it can't. We've gone through all this before: I'm past the stage of being noble. If we're going to be selfish cads, let's *be* selfish cads, and not sit weeping over the sufferings of the enemy."

"That's better," said Charles, giving her a plaintive smile. "It's the only policy."

They lay back in the grass after this and Charles smoked another cigarette, gazing up into the clear sky in peaceful silence. But the shadow of the coming struggle had fallen on them both, marking the point at which the blissful hour of reunion slid into the past, leaving them stranded uneasily at the beginning of the next stage, which could be crossed only by way of the dark morass of Isabella's tears.

Presently a light wind sprang up, and a thin canopy of mackerel cloud, very high, definite and symmetrical, spread out like a gauzy sail behind the island, and stole rapidly over the whole sky. They

discovered they were hungry. The basket, neglected for so long, was avidly unpacked, and a paper of chicken and ham, bread, lettuce and tomatoes, spread out between them. Eating and drinking, a cheerful harmony was once more established, and they returned to the subject of Eileen's tour, and whether she could leave it. She was willing, now, to tackle MacLeonard, and even anxious to do so: Charles's determination to go straight back to London and Isabella had produced a corresponding recklessness.

"I *think* it can be managed," she said. "I was only a stop-gap, anyway. There's another girl in Dublin that Mac rather fancied; if she's still free . . . she wanted the job, I know, and she'd have got it, too, if I hadn't rushed over from London and been persuasive. She was with him the year before last; she's quite good."

So it was decided to go straight back to Ennistymon and see MacLeonard, and do their best to play on his sympathetic feelings.

"Do you *like* these tours?" said Charles, helping her to pack the basket, and remembering with an inner start that he had meant to ask her innumerable questions about the lost ten years in which he had had no part. They all seemed unimportant, now—matters which could profitably be left for idle afternoons, when their troubles were over.

"I hate them like poison," she said vigorously, slapping down the lid of the picnic basket and fastening the straps, "but, once embarked, you know, there are compensations that keep one going from day to day. I'm *truly* fond of Mac; he's most touchingly kind. And of course I can't be choosy." She gave him a rapid sidelong glance that was half a smile. "I've gone down hill since you last saw me, haven't I? I'm on the last gentle, declining slopes. I shall love giving it up."

"You really won't mind?"

"Oh . . . Charles! You don't know what a squalid profession it is, at my present level. It's the lodgings that get me down most, specially in winter. Never a bath, and hardly ever a fire. It's an effort to keep one's nails clean, even." She looked down at her long, practical hands with mild distaste. "It's all right, in a way, until you reach a certain point . . . when you can still say, it's all right, it's only temporary, soon I shall have emerged from this and everything will be better. But when you've finally realised that

you never will . . . that you're going down instead of up . . . well, then, the lack of a bath, and being cold in bed at night, and washing one's clothes in scum in a bedroom basin, and one's skin being grimy become just so many unbearable defeats. One becomes simply stony with self-loathing."

"But why didn't you give it up years ago?" said Charles, folding the mackintosh. "Your aunt told me . . . She seemed to wish very much that you'd go and live with her. Wouldn't it have been much better for you?"

Eileen stared in front of her, her hands resting lightly on top of the basket.

"Well . . . yes, from a health point of view, I suppose. But I couldn't do it. Aunt Edith's frightfully poor, you know; she has no money at all. She and Florrie just get along because the house is her own, and they live off the bit of farming and the garden. There's always enough to eat, you know, because they can always go and collect an egg or dig up a potato; but there's never any ready money. It's always a struggle to pay the grocer, and I don't think she's spent a penny on clothes in the last twenty years. Of course now she's got that beastly P.G. from Dublin, but I think he's more nuisance than he's worth. He's fearfully greedy with the food, and has to have the best bedroom and indeed the best of everything, and he's vilely rude to her, always. He makes the sort of hurtful, contemptuous remarks that you wouldn't think a human being *could*. . . . But she puts up with him like an angel of sweetness—I suppose her religion helps her. I've also reason to believe that she owes him money. So obviously I can't just go and live on her as well . . . and of course I've always made that my excuse, and it's perfectly true . . . but there's another reason as well."

She sat back on her heels, considering, and turned her thoughtful eyes on Charles's face. She was searching for words, anxious to communicate the flavour of a fugitive emotion which was not easily expressed.

"It's to do with living in Ireland," she said. "I can only do it, really, when I'm either perfectly contented, or very unhappy. I could, with *you* . . . now. It's my heart's home. I spent my child-

hood here, after Mother died, and it's always been my refuge. It's like escaping out of the world, going back to the womb or something . . . I can't explain it. I always feel invisible here, as if I sank in and became absorbed, and didn't show. Do you know that feeling?"

"I think," said Charles, "I'm not sure, but I think it's the feeling I used to have about my grandmother's house in Wales. It's something to do with childhood and first impressions. The first place that one knows, and loves, leaves a kind of secret imprint on the heart; and all other places, afterwards, are being unconsciously compared with it, and rejected."

"Yes . . . yes!" She gave him a grateful glance. "But there's something else about Ireland . . . for me . . . which makes it a refuge only, not a place for life. I can run to Aunt Edith, and hide my head there, for months at a time, in perfect peace; but whenever I think of living my whole life there—I become breathless and desperate, and only want to get away. You know, it *is* curious—that feeling that Ireland's out of the world, that everything happened there a long time ago and can never happen again. Coming here to the west is like travelling backwards in time . . . falling into a trance of the past. It's the magic escape one dreams about, and can never quite accomplish. All the time there's that sense of life going on outside—never inside the green pocket. And you're lying in a charmed sleep—missing everything ordinary. Do you know"—she looked at him with sudden bemused surprise, perceiving something—"I believe there's some connection with this in all those stories. . . . 'They stole little Bridget for seven years long, And when she came home again her friends were all gone' . . . all those hundreds of stories there are in Ireland, about being stolen away by the fairies, or finding a door in the side of a hill with a magic world inside, or going through a hole in a cave and never coming out again for a hundred years . . . yes, you remember? And always the person who does it spends a magic evening or a whole day; and when they come out again, seven years have passed, and the whole world's changed, and their friends are all gone. Life passes them by while they're inside, and when they come out again, and look round, it's years too late."

She pushed her hair up from her forehead with a vague gesture, and stared dreamily at the green rise of the hill, her hands fallen in her lap.

"P'r'aps that's why Ireland seems so unreal to the people outside . . . and even to the ones inside there's a feeling of . . . of trance, of enchantment, of time mysteriously altered or standing still. That's partly why the young ones are always trying to get away, I think: it isn't only economic reasons: and then always having a terrific faithful nostalgia for it when they're outside. Even the intellectual life that they say goes on in Dublin—perhaps it does, I don't really know—gives one a funny adolescent feeling when one thinks about it. Young men sucking pipes and meeting for morning coffee at the Country Shop, and discussing *The Waste Land* over late tea. There's always the feeling that the real thing, whatever it is, can only be going on outside. So you see—" she roused herself and got slowly to her feet, brushing the bits of grass out of her skirt—"it'd be quite impossible to explain all that to Aunt Edith, and yet very depressing to live there always, as she'd like one to. She's different; she doesn't feel it. The house is her own, she was born there, she's never been out of Ireland and she's never noticed that there's anything going on outside. Of course she reads the papers, she knows with her *mind* that there's another world, but she doesn't really believe in it. It's like reading about a famine in India or an earthquake in Japan—very sad, of course, too terrible; but not a thing to be *felt* as if it happened in Galway. Besides, she really is different. She's like a nun. She's always conscious of the presence of God, and so she knows that He's in Blackstone. And the way to Heaven is straight through that little church where her father was rector. It makes her very sad that I can never quite see it. It seems so obvious to her that I ought to live there too, and get roses in my cheeks, and sit in church with tears in my eyes, as she does, every Sunday."

Charles remembered something with a start as he hung the mackintosh over his arm and picked up the basket.

"You were ill," he said. "Why did you never let me know? Are you really better?"

"Oh, yes. That was a long time ago. How did you know about it?"

"Mrs. Rovedino told me. She said you went away to a sanatorium, and wouldn't tell your aunt."

"Well, what would have been the use? She'd have come to England, agonising and full of the consolations of religion, and have made me feel much worse than I did. There's something about the very word, *consumption*, to her generation . . . like the knell of doom. And really it wasn't at all bad, you know. I'm quite well now. I just have to be careful, and coddle myself a bit when I think of it. I go and have a routine X-ray every six months; I've got quite a collection of totally incomprehensible negatives. But it's quite all right, they've been the same for ages. Did Alice Rovedino tell you about it? They were both wonderful."

They were walking slowly over the soft grass, holding hands, when Charles stopped and kissed her.

"How wonderful is Edward Rovedino?" he said, letting her go again.

Eileen gave him an inquisitive glance, and smiled.

"He's quite wonderful, in his peculiar way," she said, "though it's Alice I really love. How did you like them?"

"I hated *him*," said Charles. "I thought he was loathsome. It made me sick to think of him being in love with you."

"It shouldn't. He didn't do it on purpose. And he isn't any longer, you know. He's just a kindly benefactor."

A question hovered uneasily in Charles's mind, but his lips were dry and for some reason refused to utter it. Instead, and with horror, he heard himself in a cold voice saying something brutal.

"Sybil told me that you'd had a child by him."

He swallowed, and looked down at their feet, moving slowly together over the glistening grass.

"She *would*," said Eileen, with a flash of malice. "She met them in California, didn't she? And dropped her gentle poison into Alice's ear. The old serpent." She put her arm through his, and fell more perfectly into step, leaning lightly against him. "And did you believe her?"

"No. Not that. I thought perhaps he'd been your lover."

Eileen said nothing for a minute, and then gave him a gentle look.

"Darling, would it matter?"

He returned her gaze, and felt a light shock of pure relief. Of course it didn't matter. He must have been pretending to himself all this time, knowing that he ought to be jealous, that it was the conventional thing, that this was a dreadful question that had to be answered. . . . Whereas now, feeling her arm held warmly against his side, and seeing her eyes opening at him with their sympathetic but oddly incredulous look, he knew that the question had lost all but the most trivial dregs of its old meaning, and that the past ten years were shaken off and routed from their tyrannical position, as though they had never been.

"It would only have mattered if I hadn't got you back," he said, and was struck by the truth which sprang up from his scarcely considered words and calmly confronted him.

She gave his arm a slight pressure and smiled, looking up at the rooks which had idly tossed themselves up again out of the ruined tower as they passed it. He had a moment's suspense, the faintest possible echo of the old anguish, waiting for her to say more; but presently, as she continued to watch the birds in placid silence, he realised that she had nothing more to say, and his curiosity died down to indifference, unregretted.

"You know," said Eileen after a time, "we're very different in some ways. I haven't asked you a single question, have I? And I shan't; not for a long time yet. I feel almost superstitious about it. Having you back again is so . . . so new, it seems so perilously balanced that I wouldn't dare. . . . I shan't be able to ask you calm questions about the last ten years for—oh, not for ages. I'm much more jealous of the past than you are. I know it's there, and I don't want to lift up the least little corner of it, for fear of what I'd see. Perhaps . . . well, p'r'aps in another ten years I shall be able to say, quite serenely, 'Tell me the story of your life.' But not now. Everything's suddenly become so miraculously clear and calm that I couldn't bear the least disturbing ripple."

"There haven't *been* any ripples," said Charles simply, "there's nothing to tell." He looked back over the last ten years and saw that they were flat and colourless, not a milestone anywhere, not a single surprising feature to engage the imagination. "It's odd, isn't it?—how whole tracts of one's life can seem to leave no trace,

just a number of flat grooves, running between home and work and weekends in the country; nothing of any importance. . . ." He broke off, seeing that this was not entirely the truth, but merely the recent past as he wished it to appear—empty, without character, rinsed clean of the habitual flavour (now bitter, now tolerable, sometimes even comforting) of his relations with Isabella. From now on it would be Isabella's face, not Eileen's, which would come and go with wraithlike reproach, a drowned face, haunting his unwary moments.

He sighed.

"But that's just it," said Eileen quickly. "The placid, domestic years—they're what I grudge. I can't bear to think of them, because we should have had them together."

They walked on in silence, circling the shoulder of the hill. The road came into sight still a long way below them, and the broken wall, and the hired car standing a little askew among pimply mole-hills, forlornly waiting for them all this time with respectable dumb patience.

Eileen stood still abruptly and looked about her. She was still holding his arm.

"What an *extraordinary* thing we're doing!" she said with astonishment. "Do you realise? It *can't* happen. It's one of those things that one's always told are impossible, except in theory . . . like putting the clock back, or returning to a particular point in one's life . . . doing something queer with time. I still don't quite believe it can be done. There ought to be a catch in it somewhere: we ought to be different, or hating each other, or faced with some insuperable obstacle."

She looked at him questioningly, half serious, astonished, not quite laughing. He smiled and pressed her arm, and they went on again, following their long shadows with peaceful steps.

"And yet everything's the same," she said. "We're demonstrating the impossible. Things don't *happen* like this, not in real life. I suppose something'll crop up presently and prove us wrong."

She thought for a little, her head bent, watching the passage of grass and harebells under their feet.

"Once," she said, "I had a very vivid and peculiar feeling, con-

nected with this in some way, as though I'd discovered a natural law, or were on the verge of one. There's a sort of headland near Blackstone, with a very long shallow curving beach along one side of it, where the seabirds come in in flocks at low tide, and I used to go and look at them. And one evening, when I was walking home along the wet sand, not thinking of anything in particular, but a little exalted, perhaps, because it was so strange and desolate . . . I thought, suddenly—what *happens* to the people that one loved once, and never sees again? It seemed so mysterious, like a contradiction in nature . . . as though the link, once made, must still exist somehow, somewhere. I felt there must be a clue to it, which I couldn't find: like the indestructibility of matter, or one of those natural laws which seem so impossible in practice, but which in theory are so acceptable and satisfying, and even—I don't know why—rather comforting." She half turned, still clinging to his arm, and searched his face, her eyes wide open and so serenely clear that he noticed again the iridescent grain, flecked with yellow and greenish black, raying out through the grey pupil.

"I don't know why it seemed so important, then; but it did. I remember I stood still on the beach, and waited, as though the secret were just on the point of being grasped, and movement might startle it away. There ought to have been a revelation, then: I was disappointed that there wasn't. But the emotion stayed with me for a long time, like a high note that goes on and on reverberating; and presently, as I was walking home, I arrived at something . . . not the answer I wanted, perhaps, but something which seemed true, and at least a partial explanation." She hesitated, gazing with concentration at some invisible point. "I thought, the thing I'm looking for—the link between you and me which was once so solid that it was like a hand, or a limb—still exists: it must: but in a different form. I can only trace half of it now, the half that has been absorbed into me for ever, changing everything a little, making me what I am. And the other half was somewhere, too . . . in you; working its change and bearing its fruit for life, though I should never see it.

"And I thought . . . well then . . . it's childish to hope or wish for the thing again as it was at first, because it's passed into another stage, almost physically, and there's no travelling backwards. Just

as it's hopeless to try and dream the same dream twice, or repeat any experience."

She broke off, musing to herself, and they wandered down the last green slope in silence.

"So you see," she said, "why it all seems so peculiar to me now, as though it couldn't be real. Because we *have* gone back. At least, that's the illusion. And I've a conviction somewhere which tells me it can't be done."

"It isn't an illusion," said Charles, setting down the basket on the running-board of the car and not looking at her because he felt that there was danger in this heresy, and that he needed an answer which would reassure them both. He straightened himself with an appearance of cheerful confidence, and found her watching him with a faintly smiling but still troubled face, her hands hanging at her sides. He grasped her gently by the elbows and gave her an indulgent kiss, and then several more, the best answer he could manage.

"I tell you what it is," he said, "you've got a superstition about time. If we'd only been parted a year, you wouldn't think there was any mystic reason why we shouldn't come together again. If we'd had a ten years' engagement, and I'd been in China all that time, making a fortune, you wouldn't think it impossible. Or if I'd been in prison. Or would that be an insuperable barrier?"

"Not the least in the world," said Eileen, now laughing and leaning back against his arms, her face faintly glowing and her eyes alight. "In fact, it would be an advantage. I couldn't be jealous of your prison years, could I? Though I'm afraid you'd have hated them very much and got shockingly sour on them . . . you man of pleasure."

"I am, indeed," he said, and pulled her close again. "Everything about you gives me pleasure. I don't know how I've done without you for so long."

They clung together in reconciling stillness, driving out superstition.

"There's a boy coming, with a donkey," she murmured presently, turning her face aside.

Charles kissed her neck.

"Darling, what of it? I dare say he's pleased to see us."

"We shall put ideas into his head. Have you no conscience?"

"Plenty. They're exactly the ideas that I believe in. We shall make a convert."

"You don't know the Irish," she said, breaking away from him and becoming very busy with the basket, blushing and smiling as she swung it into the back of the car with a quick movement of her long arm, not looking at the ragged staring boy who averted his eyes with grave dignity as he passed them. "They're a puritanical, chaste people. We can't expect the least sympathy from any of *them*."

"But sympathy's the one thing we shall never need again," said Charles, when they had both got into the car and banged the doors. "In future we shall grandly bestow it on other people."

He reversed the car in a series of eccentric leaps, and they drove back, holding hands and talking all the way, to Ennistymon.

9 Charles threw aside his newspaper with a sigh and stared with unseeing concentration through the carriage window. It was just getting light.

The man opposite, who had cleared his throat at him a number of times and had been watching him furtively, seized his opportunity, and leaned forward with an eager smile lifting his grey moustache.

"Could I just look at your paper for a moment? They were sold out at the bookstall. . . ."

"Oh certainly. Do." He made a clumsy effort to fold the paper, which he had thrown down in a heap.

"Please, allow me," said the man, and took it from him with capable blunt-ended fingers, and with a couple of sharp shakes reduced it to manageable proportions.

Charles smiled faintly and turned back to the window at once, resisting the other's obvious desire for conversation, but almost immediately a cigarette case was held out to him.

"I've observed that you do smoke," said the stranger, with a deprecating smile, "so I hope you won't refuse. . . ?" He flicked open his lighter with a practiced thumb and held it steady.

"Thank you," said Charles shortly, and took a cigarette rather grudgingly, hoping that the other would perceive the strength of his determination to sit still and think, and would have the charity to leave him alone; but his neighbour was infected with the nervous excitement which was prompting converse between waking strangers all down the train, and he was longing to exchange a few reassuring platitudes with a fellow Englishman.

"Very bad news, I'm afraid," he said, referring with significant eyebrows to the paper on his knee.

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"Well, if it's got to come, it's got to come. We can't put up with this state of suspense indefinitely."

"I suppose not."

"In fact, I shan't be surprised if war's declared by the time we get to London. They ought to have wireless on the trains, in my opinion. At least in the First Class."

Charles said nothing to this, but nodded intelligently, and as soon as he dared returned his gaze to the window.

"Of course, in my view," said the other remorselessly, fitting a cigarette into a thick amber holder, "we made a great mistake not going right through to Berlin the last time. We ought to have occupied the country. Divided it up, as it used to be. Put in a few petty princes, whom one could trust." He considered Charles confidently through thick glasses. "Instead of all this idealism and disarmament. Greatest folly imaginable."

"I suppose so," said Charles weakly, and blinked and nodded, and stole a glance at the emerging landscape out of the corner of his eye.

"Funny thing," said his companion, now settling himself comfortably, elbow propped on the arm-rest and cigarette held conversationally in front of him, "we've so much in common with the Germans, if you come to think of it. Always had excellent business relations with them, myself; always found them punctual, honest, decent fellows to deal with. Can't say I know much about the Poles. Seems a funny country to be guaranteeing, but there you are. We've got to stop Hitler somewhere, and I suppose they reckon Poland's as good a place as any. Still, as I say, it's a tragedy for this country not to be friends with Germany. We could do a lot together. Much more in common with them than we have with the French. Never cared for the French, myself."

He touched his spectacles and fixed Charles afresh with brown, opaque, ludicrously magnified eyes.

"I don't believe, personally, that all these negotiations are going to do a bit of good. H'm? All these ambassadors flying backwards and forwards to Berlin. T'isn't dignified. If he means to go into

Poland, he'll go. If you ask me, he's just playing with them. He knows we want peace, he's banking on that. Personally I think it'll be a great mistake if we go to war for Poland. What's Poland ever done for us? But it's what everybody's waiting for. You can feel it in the air."

"I wonder if you'd mind," said Charles, "if I opened the window a little? It's rather hot, isn't it? I'm afraid I've got rather a bad headache. I haven't slept much."

"Not at all. Certainly," said the man, but with disappointment in his voice. "Very uncomfortable, not being able to get sleepers."

He gave Charles an uneasy stare, suspecting him.

Charles adjusted the window strap, threw away his cigarette and sat back with an apologetic smile, closing his eyes. He felt the other's scrutiny playing over him like a feeler, and kept his eyes shut with an effort, frowning slightly; but presently he heard the newspaper rustling in a businesslike manner, and ventured to open them. His vis-à-vis was temporarily hidden behind the *Times*, and Charles surreptitiously took a small blue leather diary out of his pocket and became absorbed in it.

There was a talisman on the back page, a few pencilled words to which he had turned with superstitious frequency since parting from Eileen, and he now stared at them again, drawing strength and reaffirming his faith. He had written, in his small, pointed, rather illegible hand, "Sept. 2nd. Café Royal (Regent St. ent.) 2 p.m.," and under that the address and telephone number of a house in Gower Street, and below that again the two words, "Rovedinos. Pillows."

Had they thought of everything?

Their last hours had been so crowded, feverish; raising, for Charles, to the pitch of frenzy that question always vaguely present at the beginning of a journey—what have I forgotten? The situation had had to be made so water-tight; there must be no cranny, no loophole, no possibility of failure; and Charles, in spite of all precautions, was still conscious of a suppressed uneasiness, since nothing, he felt, would have been really safe but to have travelled back to London with Eileen beside him. And this, as she had predicted, had been impossible, unless he were prepared to wait in Ireland until she could get away. But here, on his side,

Charles had found an impossibility. He had got to see Isabella, and with the news taking such rapid and obvious strides from bad to worse, he knew that he must reach her as quickly as possible. He was already guiltily conscious of the callousness of his behavior in disappearing at the very moment when she must be most hysterical, most in need of drastic decisions, however painful, and he had telephoned her that same night from Ennistymon, in a futile attempt to prepare her to some degree for what was coming, and at least reassure her that he was starting immediately for London.

He had meant to prepare her: that had been his firm intention as he stood with thickly beating heart in the telephone box at the hotel, waiting for her voice: but when it came it had exploded in his ear with such violence that he had not succeeded in saying all that he had meant to say, and had only warned her, half-heartedly and in too apologetic a voice, that he would not go to America.

"But what are you *thinking* of?" Isabella had said, almost in a scream. "I nearly dropped *dead* when I got your telegram at Oxenwood. I couldn't *believe* you'd just walked out, at a moment like this . . . and to go and have a *holiday*! Are you *mad*? Don't you read the papers? I'm simply *ill* with the strain of trying to get everything ready! And not to have the faintest idea where you were! How *could* you, Charles? How *could* you?"

He had tried to stem the torrent with assurances that he was starting back immediately, in the morning, and would be home the following morning, before breakfast.

"I should think so!" Isabella had cried angrily. "It's the most inexcusable . . . you've no consideration, no imagination. What d'you think it's been like for *me*, these last two days? Everything to decide, everything to arrange. . . . If it hadn't been for Mother I should have collapsed, been done for . . . I *can't* understand you!"

"Have you quite decided to go to America, then?" he had managed to ask.

"Yes, I have! It's too late to argue about it now. I don't even know if we can get bookings. Mother's out at the Cunard office now, I'm expecting her every minute. I'm trying frantically to pack, and arrange everything, and Miriam's being as much nuisance as possible. It's upset everything, your disappearing like that. You

ought to have been here, helping us, managing everything. . . . How do I even know what you want to take with you?"

"I'm afraid you must count me out," he had said. "I told you before, I can't simply throw up everything at a moment's notice. I'm very sorry. I'll explain when I get home."

"Do you mean to say we're not to book you a passage, if we can get one?"

"No. I definitely can't go. It's too complicated to discuss on the telephone."

"Oh, well . . ." Isabella's voice sounded less surprised than he had expected, though still furious. "That's your affair, whether you come now or later. We might not all be able to get by the same boat, anyhow, and there's absolutely *no* hope of the Clipper. There's a waiting list as long as your arm, just hanging on for cancellations. Mother's done what she could, but there isn't a hope. You don't know what it's like, or you *couldn't*—even *you* couldn't—have thought it was the moment to stay dawdling about in Ireland, never letting me know where you were, so that I couldn't even telephone you!"

"Well, I'm very sorry," Charles had said, lamely, "I didn't realise . . ."

"Obviously not!" came the tart rejoinder. "It's a bit late in the day now."

"I'll do what I can when I get home. That'll be the day after tomorrow, the morning of the first. It's impossible to get back any sooner."

"You ought never to have *gone!*" said Isabella indignantly, and was launching off again into bewailings and reproaches when he quietly put back the receiver, hoping she would think she had been cut off, and leaned against the side of the box, trembling.

He had gone back into the lounge, where Eileen was drinking coffee in a state of restlessness, and she had seen at a glance the sort of encounter he had had, and had drawn pessimistic conclusions. Her fundamental pessimism, never directly expressed—indeed, not expressed at all—but perceptible as a stealthy undercurrent at every stage of their discussions, even in her ready agreements and smiling silences, was one of the things which he had found hardest to bear; the more so, perhaps, because it lay so well concealed

and eluded the least argument. "You aren't afraid of anything going wrong, if I go back now?" he had said, and she had answered quickly, "I don't think, really, I'm afraid of anything." But he had known, from the way her eyes had rested on his face, as though, in these last hours together, she were learning it by heart, that she *was* afraid; and he had raged inwardly and in vain against this sad doubt which she pretended to feel no longer.

"We'll make our plans absolutely foolproof," he said. "You'll get to London on the morning of the second, and we'll meet at the Café Royal at two o'clock." They had both written this down, and he had also made her write down the address and telephone number of his house, though she had laughed at this, saying she was never likely to forget it, but that in any case she could never go there or ring up, until she knew for certain that Isabella was gone. Then he had given her, very carefully, as though he were dictating to a child, the address of the gallery, and she had smiled again over her pencil, and said that she knew that too, and had even been there, in a moment of recklessness, four or five years ago.

"Good Lord, when?" said Charles, looking at her with astonishment.

"Oh . . . I don't remember precisely. The winter of 1935 I think it was. I was in London. I'd always made a point of avoiding that street, but one day I found myself walking directly down it, and before I knew what I was doing I'd stopped, and was looking in the window, and the next moment I was inside, simply blind and speechless with panic."

He had stared at her with amazement, and she had laughed, a shade self-consciously, and shaken her head.

"There was nobody there. I got into the middle of the floor, and was just turning round again to make a bolt for it, when a young woman came out of the office or whatever it is at the back, and I had to think of something."

"I was probably in the office all the time!"

"Yes, I expect you were. I'd had some mad idea of asking for you, or just . . . I don't quite know what. But I lost my nerve when the girl appeared, and asked instead the price of a Picasso drawing in the window. I forget what it was, but it was an awful lot, and I could see she thought that the price must be a bit of a

blow, and was kindly racking her brains to think of something she *could* show me. But I just said, oh yes, I' think it over, obviously not deceiving her for a second, and I shot out of the place like an arrow and made off down the street. I felt such a fool, I avoided that whole area for ages after."

She had told him this anecdote with a light touch of self-mockery, as though it were merely funny and didn't matter; but Charles was saddened by it and all that it implied; yet another drop in the cup of lost opportunity.

Next, he had cast about for some safe second string, some mutual point of contact which each might hold in reserve if anything went wrong. He questioned her closely as to her usual haunts in London, and had learned, without much satisfaction, that she sometimes took a room in a house in Gower Street, and would go there directly from the train to leave her luggage, and to stay, perhaps, for a few days until everything was settled. "You'll wire ahead for a room there, of course," he had told her, and had written down the address and telephone number in his diary. "But supposing they haven't got a room for you, where will you go?" She had said she didn't know; some hotel, perhaps; but that in any case it was as good a place as any to leave messages.

At this point it had come to him very plainly that there was some reserve working in her behind all this; and that though she would not admit it, and perhaps was not even fully conscious of it as they laid their plans, she was setting a great price, in which pride had its part, on his performing successfully, without compromise or delay, everything he had promised. It was as though, through her gentle agreeing manner, she was tacitly saying, "This is the bargain. We'll meet as we've promised, at the time and place. I've given my word, and yours is the responsibility." Here he saw, in spite of the things she had said on the cliff that morning, the last provisional stand of her self-esteem. She was not, after all, so different from the Eileen of ten years ago, who had made her rapid and silent flight, buoyed up by despair and pride, in the midst of the crisis; and in spite of her bitter assertion that she had regretted it, he was aware that the dangerous possibility still lurked in her. She required of him—and he fully admitted that her need was justified—that he should prove himself; she had been converted,

persuaded into a second attempt, and had given her undertakings; but she would not answer for any failure of his, and this accounted, he thought, for the shade of grave reserve which veiled her expression when he continued to press and cast about for alternatives. She withdrew, ever so slightly, each time that he used the phrase 'if anything goes wrong,' and in her wincing away from it he thought he perceived a deep habit of disillusion and insecurity.

Oh, well: if it all rested on him, that was what he wanted. He no longer had any doubts of his own strength; he had arrived at the point where he found himself—desire, intention, courage to be ruthless—consistent right through; his only fear was of the quick-moving sinister drive of external events and their unpredictable accidents, and the dormant seeds of defeat in Eileen which they had power to quicken.

She had absolutely refused to consider Miss Bagnold as a port in any storm they were likely to encounter, and he had had to give way on this point, though he himself would have been willing to consider it. Why shouldn't she, he said, go straight to Blackstone as soon as she was free and wait for him there?—this suggestion having at least the advantage that in case of difficulty or delay he would know where to find her. "But don't you *see*," she had said, her eyes growing quite dark with horror as she saw them meeting, constrained, in Aunt Edith's parlour, "that that's the *last* place we can go to? I shall get her round in time, you know, but it won't be easy. I shall have to present her with a *fait accompli* and trust to her affection. But I can't just go and wait for you there, under her very eyes. I haven't the stamina." Besides, she had pointed out—and this argument had more weight with him than the other—supposing war were declared before they came together, mightn't all travelling be put a stop to, even between England and Ireland? He himself had given this as one of the reasons for her coming quickly to London, and it would be stupid, she said, to go through so much for the sake of being together, and then be kept apart, perhaps for months, by mere regulations.

So Aunt Edith had been ruled out, at least from the preliminaries, and he had turned with fresh inspiration to the Rovedinos. She had agreed quite readily, and with an appearance of relief that he had not suggested anything more difficult, that Alice Rovedino

would be an ally, and that they could both communicate through her "if anything went wrong." Not Eddie, she said: he would perhaps not be reliable in the circumstances: but Alice, yes: she was sympathetic and a born romantic; to assist, however slightly, in their conspiracy would probably give her pleasure. Charles had not much liked the word 'conspiracy,' but had let it pass, and written down 'Rovedinos' in his notebook. It still seemed to him, however, that their plan was not yet sealed at every corner, and he had gone on to an eager consideration of the Pillows.

He was not sure, when he made it, how she would meet this suggestion, for to him, as confidants, the Pillows had disadvantages. They would be instantly agog; they would take possession of the situation and make it their own; and he had a wry vision of their meeting having to take place, after possible failures and difficulties, under the blaze of two pairs of keenly analytical eyes in Iris's studio. It would be rather like coming together in an operating theatre, but the plan would at least have the merits of its disadvantages; the Pillows would be alert, precise, scientifically interested in bringing the thing off, undeflected by conventional or moral scruples, unlikely to make muddles. They were benevolent, fundamentally; they would be pleased to help the course of true love to run smooth, if only as an experiment.

"What about letting Geoffrey and Iris know?" he had said. "They're well disposed, I think, and if by any unlucky chance we missed one another, it'd be a place to communicate." And Eileen, except for a faint evasive flicker of the eye as she saw the unlucky chance laying its all too probable detaining hand on him, had lit up with sudden affectionate warmth at mention of the Pillows, and had appeared to rest on them.

"You don't mind them knowing, then? You don't find them . . . putting off, in any way?"

"Oh, no! Sweet Pillows, I always loved them. They'd be the perfect liaison."

"I suppose they are sweet," he had said dubiously, "but why does it strike one as being the wrong word, I wonder? I'm always immensely fond of them when I'm with them, but when I'm not, I dwell on their shortcomings."

"You're just jealous," said Eileen, laughing. "They're so com-

pact, and happy. They've got everything we haven't. They're terribly pleased with very little, like unspoiled children. They're wonderful."

He considered this new view of Geoffrey and Iris, and admitted its justice. What annoyed him, perhaps, was exactly the same thing that annoyed Isabella—the very fact that they *were* so pleased with everything that lay open to them, with all the details, self-made or inherited, of their own lives, and the specimen lengths which, for their own amusement or instruction, they snipped out of other people's. Seen thus, the Pillows were consistent in their own special, queerly astringent flavour; they were valuable, tough, undaunted; even endearing. Considering them for a long moment, with his eyes on hers, he had freed himself, with a quick shake of the imagination, from Isabella's sphere of influence, and had seen them with a new and clearer perception, coloured by the bias of Eileen's more comprehending nature.

"They're one of the things I've most regretted," she said, "in the last ten years—not having the Pillows to go to when I was in London. I could have had them, of course, if I'd been less defensive. They wouldn't have taken sides, or made mischief. The worst they'd have done would have been to enjoy, a little too much, knowing us both, and not having to say a word to either of us about the other. They'd have managed it, too." She mused, smiling to herself at the thought of the rigour with which they upheld their self-made standards, the durable quality of their funny sub-acid excellence. "I did meet Iris once, in the King's Road, ages ago. I could see she was dying for me to say something about you, but I didn't; so at last she said, 'We had Charles to dinner three weeks ago,' and stood and waited. I said, 'Oh Iris, I don't want him to know that I'm in London—ever.'" She took it in, and changed the subject, and I've never seen her again. And I don't suppose for a moment that she ever told you she'd seen me."

"No, it's true, she didn't."

"Well, you see, that's so nice—the very antithesis of Sybil. And when Geoffrey turned up in Blackstone he never mentioned you at all, though I think he wanted to; there was the feeling that, if I'd opened the subject, he'd have been all keenness and sympathy;

but that so long as I didn't, he was prepared to find my silence interesting in itself, and leave it at that."

Sitting back in the railway carriage with his eyes closed, Charles turned over this newly uncovered aspect of the Pillows' discretion, wondering what was the little hard nodule of dissatisfaction which, for him, lay under its estimable surface: and presently, feeling backwards and forwards, testing the smoothness of their behaviour at every point, he discovered that the pea under the mattress was no fault of theirs: it was simply the small round distinct vision, as hard as a pebble, of Eileen and Iris gossiping together in the King's Road, in the centre of that desert of time when he had thought of Eileen as altogether lost, as not existing in the same world any more—let alone in Chelsea, not many hundred yards away. And Iris had seen her, and—this was the interesting, the disconcerting fact—had said nothing; even on that memorable evening when he had almost openly begged for crumbs, and Iris had obviously known that he was begging; and all because Eileen, and not he, had claimed discretion.

He took a silver pencil from his pocket, keeping his eyes down because of the man opposite, and made a little mark under the Pillows' name. This signified, to himself, his acceptance of Geoffrey and Iris as go-betweens; marked them, as with a star, preferred; in some inscrutable unintentional way they had proved themselves reliable.

He remembered, then, something more which Eileen had said, an observation lightly added which had shed its special ray of illumination. "They're friends who really perform the offices of friendship." That was true, too. They did perform them, if one came to think of it, though in a cool impersonal preoccupied style peculiar to themselves, as though it were their own satisfaction that concerned them—as perhaps it was; so that one often didn't notice.

What *could* have been forgotten?

He frowned at the diary, making light meaningless strokes with his pencil down the edge of the page, pursuing round and round, as in frothy water, the significant ripple of a thought which always eluded him.

Aubrey!

He raised his eyes with a start, having captured it at last, and was relieved, in the act of defensively lowering them again, to see that his enemy with the grey moustache had fallen asleep. His head was lolling sideways against his hired pillow, he had taken off his spectacles, and his face had dropped apart in grotesque and pitiful lines which waking he would certainly never have permitted. Charles examined him with hostility, conscious of his advantage, and then turned his attention to the window with a renewal of confidence.

Some suggestive quality in the fields, in the glimpse of metalled roads, in the still sleeping red-brick villages raying out from their level crossings, told him that they were flying, now, over familiar ground. The slated roofs, the loose stone walls of Wales, the loamy fields of the midlands had been passed in darkness. They would soon be in London.

Yes, Aubrey! Why had he never thought of him till now? This clearly was Aubrey's moment, the cue for which his experienced sympathy was waiting. He made rapid calculations, trying to see how, at this late hour, Aubrey could be woven securely into the texture of his plan, made to stop some last hypothetical cranny. Eileen didn't know him; that was a pity. But he could see Aubrey, surely, during the day; Isabella couldn't prevent his looking in at the gallery; and he could give him a quick sketch of the situation and secure him as an ally. And then, perhaps, a telegram to Eileen? "If any difficulty communicate Aubrey Irwin at gallery or Rectory Cottage Esher."

Sensible, prudent . . . but somehow it wouldn't do. Eileen would not like the first three words of that telegram, and yet without them, without some signal to show that it was simply a further precaution, the thing just made nonsense and might also be ambiguous, alarming. He tried to think of some other way of putting it which would exclude the fatal suggestion of expected failure. "On arriving London please communicate Aubrey Irwin . . ." ? No; that too held the germ of a hint that a pause was inevitable; and he had seen in time, far too clearly to be mistaken about it, that the only safe course was simple certainty.

He sighed, admitting to himself that Eileen, at the last, had been

a shade difficult. With all her frank acceptance, her wonderful posture of complete surrender, she had, in the end, been not altogether pliable. It was understandable; he could not find it in him to blame her for a reservation which she had loyally, at some cost, kept below the surface; but it was nevertheless a pity. If she really were (as she sometimes mysteriously seemed to be) another part of himself, it would have been so easy to say, Look, if this fails, we'll do that; and if we miss each other here, we'll meet there; and if absolutely everything goes wrong we'll both communicate with so-and-so. But she was herself; a person in some aspects almost unknown, resting on an experience of life in which he had already played a cautionary part, and which had produced strong secret fruits of disillusion.

This incalculable element in her, much as one deplored it now and wished it way, had in the past made its contribution to her value. In spite of what she had said in bitterness it had preserved her, had kept out the insidious rot of pathos from her position. Isabella, with her different tactics, had not really gained anything; at the best she had postponed her own disaster, and had meanwhile allowed the idea of Eileen to kindle like a beacon—very far off, it is true, and at times forgotten; but always, when he looked, most strangely, most compellingly steady.

Yes, it had had its value for him; but now it was making demands on him which were unfairly difficult. If obstacles arose it would be through no fault of his, but she had tacitly imposed the condition that he should deal with them alone.

But perhaps, he thought, nothing *would* go wrong, and there was much to be thankful for. She had certainly tackled MacLeonard with determination, in spite of initial unwillingness, and had carried off her unprofessional behaviour with a drive which astonished him—knowing, as he now did on reflection, how much it had cost her. They owed much to MacLeonard, who after the first indignant protest had allowed himself to be manoeuvred into an attitude of sympathy, and had paced about and stroked his jaws while Eileen pleaded, and Charles had walked up and down in the dark outside, waiting for some sign of hope from the interview. It had taken a long time, but finally Eileen had rushed out in the street and found him, and he had been carried up into the presence

and allowed a small part in the impromptu performance. By the time Charles reached the sitting-room MacLeonard had already made his mental adjustments and was feeling his way to a new and congenial role—wonderful benefactor, man of feeling, patron of distressed lovers. He had patted Charles in fatherly fashion on the shoulder, kissed Eileen several times on the forehead, holding her face in his hands, and had given a fine sketch of a great artist whose heart was his ruin. He glanced, but only in passing, at the fact that he was destroying his interest and spoiling his tour, and magnificently brushed aside their stammered apologies. He had always been a fool, he said; it was too late in the day to change: it was a weakness of his to wish to see people happy, and he would cut off his hand for Eileen because he loved her. Then he had put on his huge green overcoat and clapped on his broadbrimmed hat and gone off with them to the hotel to negotiate by telephone. He had talked all the way, modestly disclaiming virtue and filling in his new character with inspired touches, and Charles had been really moved by it and only tenderly amused, because the performance was not merely a performance, in spite of MacLeonard's enjoyment of it, but a work of art growing out of a warm reality.

So they had perched in the bar of the hotel, sipping apricot brandy and admiring the manager's marble fireplace (which had something special about it, Charles couldn't remember what) and at the same time listening each with an anxious ear for the result of MacLeonard's telephoning to the girl in Dublin. And it had been all right; everything had fallen into place with miraculous smoothness, and they had found themselves within half an hour being stood drinks by MacLeonard himself, who by this time was in such good humour about the change-over that Eileen was able to make a pretence of jealousy. "I believe you really prefer my rival," she had said, drawing her eyebrows together, and he had laid his large hand on hers and said loudly, "I don't prefer *anyone* to you, darling," and then had given them a very serious talk on the importance of living one's life and the duty of happiness, which the barman had visibly found hard to bear, since it was long past midnight.

He became aware that time was passing slowly. The man opposite him was awake, had recovered his alert watchful communica-

tive expression and was looking at his watch, at Charles and out of the window in turn, confirming his own suspicion that the train was late.

"Never known this train late before," he observed, catching Charles's eye. "It's all this evacuation, I suppose. Troops movements too, I wouldn't be surprised. Special trains running all over the country." He smoothed his brown leather gloves over his knee and yawned, making Charles conscious, as he watched his cheeks crease stiffly with the effort, but he too was unshaved after a soiling night, and probably looked equally unappetising. "Still," said the other, his eyes watering from the yawn, "one good thing about getting in at this time in the morning—you can't be late for anything except your breakfast."

Charles nodded and faintly smiled, oppressed now by the weight of what lay before him. All night he had been preoccupied with Eileen, testing his resources, examining his plan, of which the *eclaircissement* with Isabella was the absolute pivot; but the ordeal itself, since its results were so incalculable, he had postponed considering. Now, as the outer suburbs converged on the train and drew it at smooth speed between ribbon gardens, he found himself face to face with it, with Eileen no more than a consoling memory on which he rested, and which upheld and refreshed him each time he anxiously turned to it, like a cool pillow under a fevered cheek. At least, now that he had come so close, had plunged like the train into the last hideous stifling tunnel, the thick nightmare of approach would soon be over. He abandoned any attempt to decide what he would do, and gave himself up to suspense and inward shuddering.

It was Doddy who came downstairs to him as he opened the door—a little wild in her general appearance but still with her habitual outward air of patience, beneficent and reassuring.

"Madam's awake, and having her coffee," she said. "She said to go straight up, if you don't mind, and have it with her."

He nodded and set down his bag and went upstairs. At the first landing, with a silent rush which suggested anxious vigilance,

Miriam pounced on him. She drew him at once, without a word, through the half-open door of the drawing-room, which at this early hour, with the cushions still dishevelled and the ash-trays unemptied, had an air of desolate privacy quite foreign to it. She was still in her dressing-gown and pyjamas, and observing the discreet mature way in which she gently closed the door before throwing her arms around him, he was struck by the old pervading caution and suspicion which the house breathed, and in which Miriam instinctively moved as in her natural element.

"I was so afraid you wouldn't come in time," she whispered, hanging round his neck. "You did say I needn't go, didn't you? Didn't you, Daddy?"

He held her off at arms' length and looked at her. She was without her spectacles, and her hair, newly washed and curled at the ends (for departure?) fell softly backwards from her neck in a way that arrested him. Taking it all in, her parted lips, her pale flawless skin, her large luminous short-sighted eyes, he perceived at once, disturbingly, that this was his first authentic glimpse of the possible Miriam in whom he had dimly believed, but who always till now had lain so blightingly concealed—suspected, hoped for, but without much faith—under rats'-tails and spectacles. However often, in future, the disguise of unprepossessing childhood were again imposed on her, he now saw for a certainty the lines she would follow, and the discovery startled him and made him feel suddenly at a loss, in the same moment that it charmed him.

"What do you mean?" he said, staring at her.

"You *did* say I could stay with you! Mother won't hear of it. I'm packed for, and everything. We're to go at three o'clock."

"Where to?"

"To Liverpool. Grandma's got us all cabins on an American boat. It's leaving for New York, tonight."

She looked at him with desperate appeal, holding his arms, then swept her hair back from her ears with the old nervous gesture, shaking off the romantic illusion of promise and becoming a child again, lanky and oddly pathetic without her spectacles.

He considered quickly.

"But what should I do with you then, if you stayed behind?"

"Oh anything, it doesn't matter," she said. "I can go back to school on the twentieth. *I don't mind.*"

"But if your ticket's bought, and you're packed for and everything?" He was beginning to waver. Miriam, as a part of his recklessness? How did she fit in? Could she be made to?

"But you *promised*," said Miriam, aghast. "I *told* them so, and they wouldn't believe it, but I knew that as soon as you got back . . ." He saw her waiting for him, waking early and watching the square from her high window, submitting to packing and curling and preparations, and all the time only fearing that he would be too late and by sheer unintentional accident betray her trust, never dreaming that he hadn't given her a thought, hadn't once remembered to glance at her predicament.

He attempted a last evasion.

"What about Philip, though?"

"Oh he wants to go. He's mad about it."

"I mean, won't you mind being separated?"

She shook her head, and the soft unfamiliar locks came curling forward again, putting him once more in the presence of a promised person.

"I don't mind anything, really," she said, "except leaving you," and at that he found his mind made up, and knew that whatever he might be driven to by circumstances, he would never incur the guilt of that particular betrayal.

"Don't worry," he said, "I'll see about it," and patted her on the shoulder and went upstairs.

Isabella's bedroom was in wild disorder, the floor built up with boxes and a huge open cabin trunk and foaming with tissue paper. She was sitting on the edge of the strewn bed with her back to the door and her breakfast tray beside her; the windows were closed and the electric fire full on as a gesture against the earliness of the morning.

She got up abruptly as Charles came in and stood with her back to the fire, holding her cup of coffee, and he felt the atmosphere at once as crackling with hostility.

"So you *have* turned up, after all," she said, moving the folds of her white muslin dressing-gown with one hand, out of reach of

the fire. He noticed that she was already beautifully made up and that her hair shone with grooming. It was part of her special character to be always as perfect as a wax rose under glass, no matter what the circumstances.

"Yes," he said, "I'm afraid the train was late," and looked round, simulating surprise, at her preparations.

Isabella gave him a long look which might have meant anything, and then stepped lightly across to the breakfast tray and bent over it.

"Well, come and have some coffee," she said, pouring out. "I dare say you need it."

He cleared a space on the end of the bed and sat down, accepting the cup of coffee in silence, and with a troubled glance. He had expected her to open the attack at once, but now he saw that she preferred him to take the initiative, and was marshalling her forces. This nonplussed him a little, but the delay was also a relief, and he drank his coffee with a more grateful avidity than he felt, glad of the time it gave him to find an opening.

"So you're really off this afternoon?" he said, glancing at the trunk. "You managed to get bookings?"

"Who told you that?" said Isabella, looking very hard at him.

"I met Miriam on the stairs. She told me."

Isabella turned up her eyes in exasperation.

"That child! She's been the *last* straw. We've had nothing but rows and scenes these last two days. I'm thoroughly sick of her."

"Then why take her?" said Charles boldly, snatching at this possible approach to his own matter. "She doesn't want to go, I know. It seems silly to force her."

Isabella stared at him with a controlled face, but he noticed that the hand which held her cup was trembling. So his first impression was the right one, after all. This frigid calm was more ominous than immediate attack: she meant him to see the effort with which she was holding herself in, so that when it came it would burst on his head with double violence, reproach reinforcing fury.

"What do you imagine I'm going for?" she said in a sharp voice. "My own amusement? Doesn't it occur to you that I'm *doing* it for the sake of the children?"

"Yes, I know. But I think you're doing it more for Philip's sake

than Miriam's, and as she really seems to dread it, I think she's old enough to be allowed some preference."

"Preference? At *her* age? How can she possibly have any judgment? Besides, it's all settled. Mother's done miracles of wire-pulling, and got us all four passages. The boat-train goes at three."

"But I promised Miriam," he persisted, "that she shouldn't go if she didn't want to. She's relying on that. I don't see any point in moving her to America against her will. After all, *I'm* not going. I can look after her."

Isabella stared at him for a long moment with queer intensity. Meeting her eyes at last under the discomfort of her silence, he was dismayed to see them suddenly fill with tears. She turned round from him abruptly and leaned her elbow on the mantelpiece, dropping her head on her hand.

"I *don't* understand you," she said in a piteous voice, "I *simply* don't," and he knew from the way her hand slipped surreptitiously down to her pocket and up again that she was crying.

Charles looked about at various things in the room, at the gold and enamel brushes on the dressing-table, at his empty cup, at the tide of crisp foamlike paper lapping his ankles, and tried to hold himself aloof from this distress. Was it real or feigned? What did she already know? He had been prepared for violence, but not for these hidden silent disconcerting tears, which were not like Isabella, and which affected him as a warning of something for which he had not calculated.

He cleared his throat.

"Isabella, what is it?" he said, his voice sounding a little harsh because he was so much afraid of treacherous kindness. "You knew all along I wasn't coming with you. I told you, didn't I?"

She sniffed and shook her head, keeping her face hidden.

"It isn't only that," she said through her tears. "It's everything—all your incredible selfishness and unkindness." She turned round suddenly, her face quite pitiful and ugly with stifled crying, and bitterly confronted him. "You've always been selfish. That's nothing new. It's what I expected. But how you *could* . . . at this time of all horrible moments . . . go off and disappear for a holiday—a *holiday!*—and leave me to face everything and do everything, without the least advice or help, not even knowing where you

were. And now," she went on in a rush of tears, seeing that he was about to speak, "you turn up coolly at the absolute last second and do nothing but criticise and obstruct and try and upset my plans. It's *too* much," she said, "*too* much," and threw herself down in one of her little satin chairs and gave herself over to crying.

Charles got up and walked to the window, stumbling over coat-hangers and shoes.

"I'm sorry you take it like that," he said, putting his hands in his pockets and standing solidly with his back to her. "I haven't made the situation. It's none of my doing. You seem to forget I didn't know you were leaving so soon, or even that you'd definitely decided."

"But you're not blind or deaf!" cried Isabella. "You knew perfectly well it was likely to be war any minute—if not today, then tomorrow. You knew perfectly well there were all these decisions to make, and that I was worried nearly to death about them already. You'd no *business* to go off at all—let alone without telling me. I'd never have believed that even *you* could do anything so damnable."

"Well," said Charles lamely, "but you'd gone to Oxenwood."

Isabella threw out her hands in front of her and then let them drop, as though words failed to express her sense of his futility.

"As if that were comparable! *I* go to Oxenwood with Mother and Philip, an hour and a half from Liverpool Street, and after asking you to go with me. *You* disappear to the west of Ireland, without telling a soul, without leaving an address, or giving the least indication of how long you meant to stay there. It's the behaviour of a lunatic."

"Not really," said Charles, falling back mildly but perceptibly on defence, "I didn't decide to go until you'd already left, and I sent you a telegram. I couldn't give you an address because I hadn't one to give you. I went without any plan, except to move about. Which I did. And I rang you up, when the news got really bad, and came home. I don't see anything so very extraordinary in that."

"No," said Isabella, carefully wiping the tears from under her eyes, "you wouldn't. That's what upsets me, that's what I've always had to contend with—your total, callous lack of imagina-

tion. I might have expected it, I suppose, but it's been the last straw." She stared at her handkerchief, drawing it tight through her fingers, and Charles, turned back from the window and standing in gloomy silence, tried to fathom the thoughts that were working in her. She had given no hint that she knew what he had really been doing, but her distress, her mortification and bitterness were very real; she looked ill and shaken, unreliable, unlike herself, as though at a touch she might take refuge in hysteria. The words jumped to his mind, so clearly that he could almost believe them spoken, "Look here, Isabella, there's something else as well. I've been seeing Eileen in Ireland, and I'm going back to her." He hovered on the edge of speech, his mouth dry. Isabella was still staring at her handkerchief, and now, as he cleared his throat, she raised her head and gave him a glance of impatience.

"For God's sake don't let's discuss it," she said. "I'm *too* disgusted. *Too* angry. I dare say I'm hysterical."

She got up with a frown from her low chair, took her empty cup from the mantelpiece, and with trembling hands poured herself out some coffee. She drank it slowly, with attention, as though it steadied her, and watching her lowered eyelids and slowly swallowing throat and the droop of fatigue apparent in her whole person, he had a sensation of subsidence, of stepping back in time on to safer ground, and knew with something like relief that he had rejected the moment.

When next Isabella spoke he felt himself swept far out of reach of it, and knew it was hopeless, for the time being, to try to get back.

"I'm overwrought," she said, "but of course you wouldn't understand *that*. You don't know what it's been like. I hardly dare breathe, in case something happens at the last moment. If anything else goes wrong, I shall break down and start raving."

She made a sudden movement, snatched at a garment on the bed, apparently at random, and began to walk backwards and forwards between the bed and the trunk, busying herself in an aimless fury of packing.

"I was just listening to the news before you came," she said, giving him an accusing glance. "It's so frightfully ominous, I can hardly bear to turn it on, and yet one *has* to listen, in case there's

anything definite. . . . A man at the American Embassy told Mother that as soon as war's declared there'll be travel restrictions. . . . We mightn't be able to get away at all, or at least might have to stay until we got permits. . . . It terrifies me. . . . Almost every hour there's some new thing, some fresh complication." She was putting things into the trunk and taking them out again, staring about her with a distracted air, as though she were performing meaningless hypnotic actions. She threw off her sentences disjointedly, not making much attempt to keep the quaver out of her voice, and at each one something rose in him, testing her tone, her words, for the clear moment when the inner note would strike and he would say what he must. But it didn't come; there was still no moment that could be recognised as anything but the wrong one; and as he debated in silence the impulse grew gradually weaker and after some ineffectual flutterings was suddenly quiet.

Eileen, he thought without surprise, had been wiser than he. She had known that it could do no good, and had clearly been frightened by his certainty that he was somehow in duty bound to force the issue. She had been afraid of his making the attempt, and had foreseen possible defeat; and now, though he had no doubts at all as to his own purpose, he saw another danger which it would be madness to rush at—simply that at the first breath of revelation Isabella, already in an abnormal state and liable to do anything, would recklessly throw up the sponge and refuse to go, producing a fresh situation unnecessarily painful and difficult to deal with.

He breathed more freely when he had almost decided—not quite, but almost—to say nothing. Eileen was right. A letter, after Isabella's departure, was the only way. He took a last look at what he had all along considered his obligation to make a clean breast, no matter what it cost, and saw that it no longer had very much validity. He was committed to Eileen now, irrevocably, and had no right to make her pay for his scruples.

As this became clear his discomfort in Isabella's presence perceptibly lightened. It came to him that until that precise moment he had still maintained, uneasily, a foot in either camp. The weight, it was true, had all been on Eileen's side, but the other foot had been resting in deprecating discomfort, just on the ground, to the extent that he had still been committed to pity, to guilt, to a self-

torturing share in every likely symptom of Isabella's suffering. Now that was mysteriously so no longer, and he saw that his confusion and tongue-tied wretchedness had been due to an attempt to fear, to feel, to suffer on both sides at once. It can't be done, he said to himself, feeling his spirit harden.

"I don't know, I don't think anyone knows," said Isabella suddenly, pausing in the act of wrapping a pair of shoes, "what chance you'll have of getting across later. We tried to find out, but nobody could tell us anything. If you'd been here . . ." Her lip trembled, and she went on rapidly with her packing. "Of course, if nothing happens, we shan't be long away. In any case I don't propose to stay more than three or four months. I should leave the children with Mother."

Charles stared at this, and suddenly remembered Miriam.

"That's just as you think best," he said, "but about Miriam—I'm afraid I'm going to make a point of your leaving her behind."

Isabella compressed her lips, but said nothing, and it became clear to him that her determination had nothing to do with Miriam's safety or her own preference, but in some helpless obscure way was designed to punish him.

"Her cabin's booked, and paid for," said Isabella stiffly. "We had a great deal of trouble to get it."

"Well, you won't have any difficulty in disposing of it. I'll telephone as soon as the office opens. There'll be hundreds of people fighting for Miriam's cabin."

A thought seemed to strike Isabella, and she paused with her hand on the lid of the trunk and looked at him.

"Charles," she said, on a queer note, "won't you come with us? I mean, if Miriam does want to stay behind, it could be arranged, couldn't it? It'd be quite easy."

"And let Miriam stay by herself in London, while I used her ticket?" he said, amused that she should so readily give it away that her cry of the children's safety meant really her safety and Philip's, and, if possible, his.

Isabella flushed, and gave a slight blow with her hand to the lid of the trunk.

"Don't answer me like that! Of *course* she wouldn't be alone anywhere—or in London. She'd be at school, and Daddy and Mrs.

Swann would look after her in the holidays. Isn't that what she wants?"

"What she wants," said Charles slowly, "is, oddly enough, I think, to stay with me."

Isabella stared at him for a moment with what looked like hatred, and then put her hands up to her head, as though to steady it.

"Oh . . . do what you damned well please," she said, on a kind of groan, "I've no more to say."

She stood quite still, holding her head, and Charles became aware of the quiet ticking of the little bedside clock, inexorably marking the moments as they fell, and as he failed to make use of them.

"I don't think," said Isabella presently in a strained voice, not looking at him, "that I can go on packing while you stand in the room like that. I can't concentrate."

"All right," he said quietly, "there's plenty of time. We can discuss details later."

He made his way unobtrusively to the door, which opened silently as he put out his hand to it. It was Sybil, on padded slippers and in a satin dressing-gown, moving in her own cloud of exhaled tobacco.

"Ah, ve wanderer," she said, taking him all in with attentive eyes, picking up his scent so to speak, and then smiling as she got it, lowering her heavy eyelids in languid pleasantry. "So you're back in time to see us off, you reprobate. I hoped you would be."

"Yes," said Charles, wondering why at a moment when her presence and influence could be nothing but sinister, he should be quite glad to see her. Was it as a relief from Isabella's incalculable tension, or because, as he encountered Sybil's inquisitive smile, he had a conviction—with nothing to make it so but its own intensity—that Isabella's lack of suspicion was not shared by her mother, and that it was Sybil and not Isabella that he had ultimately to reckon with? He had, at all events, a sense of recognition and almost of relief—the exhilaration that he might have felt, after long reconnoitering and listening, at the first sight of the enemy.

He smiled, and was conscious of a certain impudence in doing so, and saw that Sybil, too, was aware of the touch of brazenness, and was by no means altogether unfriendly to it.

"Isabella fought you were certain to be too late," she said, holding her opulent satin draperies with one hand and putting her half-smoked cigarette in her mouth with the other, "but I said no, if I know my Charles he won't fail us, and I booked you a seat on ve train wiv us, in spite of everyfing."

"But I'm not coming!" said Charles, with a startled sense of having been, after all, mistaken.

"Oh, only to Liverpool," she laughed at him. "I don't flatter myself I can persuade you *all* ve way, when Isabella's failed. Not at vis elevenf hour."

"Oh, Mother, *do* shut the door," said Isabella peevishly, "it's making an awful draught, and blowing the paper about."

Sybil looked into the room with faint interest, but made no move.

"You need some air in vis room," she said, "you'll give yourself a headache."

"I've got a splitting one already."

"But of course! I could have told you. You're deliberately working yourself up to be ill on ve journey."

"I'm doing nothing of the sort," said Isabella, moving rapidly about the room with her arms full of hats, "so please don't get excited."

But this was the sort of rudeness which Sybil rarely took amiss, and usually, for amusement's sake, turned to her advantage.

"But why not?" she said, inhaling a mouthful of smoke on a deep breath. "I'm excited at seeing Charles." She gave him an abetting glance. "Besides, I never can see why it's always considered so insulting to be accused of excitement. It's ve condition I prefer."

"The condition *I* prefer is freedom from draught," said Isabella, and banged the door of a cupboard.

Sybil smiled, and laid a caressing hand on Charles's arm.

"I want to talk to you," she said in a rich voice, and moved confidently away to the door of her own room across the landing. Charles closed Isabella's door behind him and followed warily.

Sybil swept up a heap of letters from the armchair at the foot of her bed and settled herself on the small sofa opposite.

"Well?" she said.

"Well?" said Charles after a pause, letting his eyes rest on the

splendid bouquet of carnations leaning out in extravagant profusion from a tall vase beside her. Below them, on the little table, was a piece of ribbon and a card. "Somebody seems to have bunched you pretty handsomely."

She smiled, glancing idly for a moment at the flowers, and then coming back to him.

"Ah, you see, I've had to be so nice to all ve influential Americans in London, and vis is ve result."

She was still waiting for him to begin, leisurely expectant, not pressing him.

"I'm afraid," he said, taking the line which seemed comparatively the easiest, "that Isabella's still very much upset over my not coming with you."

"Naturally," she said. "She wanted it ve'y much. But it's simply ve frenzy of departure vat's working in her now. Isabella can never fink of more van one fink at once."

There was meaning in this, provisionally dropped for him to notice or not as he chose, and he cautiously followed it up.

"You think it wrong of me?"

She gave him a long look.

"My dear Charles, vat's entirely your own affair. *I* knew, from ve first, before you went back to Ireland, vat you wouldn't come. It's taken Isabella longer to realise it, you see—vat's all. And she's correspondingly, as a result, raver more exhausted."

"How much does she mind?" said Charles abruptly, staring at the flowers.

"She minds, I should judge, much less at ve moment van she will presently. I imagine it's ve same for a good many of vese wives and husbands and children who're separating for ve war. It won't be until it's started, wiv ve Atlantic Ocean between vem, vat vey'll realise it may be for years and it may be for ever. As it says in ve song."

"But that surely," said Charles, "has to be considered before you decide to go to America for safety."

"Of course. Or, equally, before you decide to stay behind."

Their eyes met on this, and again Charles had the uncanny feeling that she knew precisely what he intended to do, and was waiting for him to tell her. To gain time he slowly took out his case and

lit a cigarette, listening as he did so to a second prompting which warned him, whatever he did, on no account to hand himself over to Sybil. It was this same manner, of knowledge tempered by sympathy, which had trapped him before, and he felt himself now too close to his objective not to be afraid of it. If she revealed her knowledge, well and good—he would state his terms: but if she did not, if she continued to wait like this with the trap conveniently held open, he would take good care to do nothing more dangerous than walk round it. This, choosing his words, he began to do, in spite of his startlingly complete impression that everything—or almost everything—had been said already.

“And what attitude do *you* take?” he asked her, with the faintest possible smile. “I won’t promise to be guided by it, but I should like to know what it is.”

Sybil looked at him for a moment and crossed her knees, and then began smoothing her satin draperies over them with a thoughtful air, as though she had dropped her game for the time being, and were intent on dredging up only what was clear and truthful. Her face, as she sat and thought, fell into lines at once serious and unfamiliar, and he found himself observing with detached surprise all the signs of age she showed—the loose neck, the slightly sagging cheek, the faded hair—all the symbols that one was usually too much hypnotised to notice, the truths which her huge magnetism, in all her less inwardly preoccupied moments, kept powerfully at bay.

“My attitude, now . . .” she said, after a long pause, looking down at her hands; “you really want to know it?”

“Yes,” said Charles, with meaning. “It’s something I’ve always thought it would be helpful to know.”

“Yes . . . well . . . I’m ve’y fond of you, Charles. You know vat. I’m also ve’y fond of Isabella. Vat, too, goes wivout saying. But I’m a realist, Charles. I fink I see what ve situation is, and my attitude . . . my attitude, I believe, is vat ve time’s come for Isabella to paddle her own canoe.”

She paused, seeming incredibly, to have some difficulty in finding words, and after an uneasy interval, in which Charles heard himself breathing, got up without looking at him and went to the dressing-table.

"It's a fink," she said, opening a drawer and methodically beginning to sort out some small possessions, "vat Isabella's never been ve'y good at, has she? Perhaps, in some ways, Charles, you aren't ve right man for her. Wiv all her wonderful qualities, she hasn't ve necessary stamina." She looked at him in the mirror with a crooked smile, the turned-down ironical corners of her mouth preparing an atmosphere of protective mockery for what she was going to say. "In vat respect, you know, it's really me you ought to have married—not Isabella."

"My dear Sybil, it's often felt, most restrictingly, as though I had."

She laughed, and went on in an easy way with what she was doing.

"I fink," she said, coming back to the matter in hand, "vat vere's no longer, my dear Charles, much good to be got out of you. At least by Isabella. And vough I'm fond of you, as you know, and so deplore it, yet I'm bound to look at ve question from *her* side, and fink accordingly."

"Have you discussed it, then?" said Charles, hardly daring to breathe.

"Oh no," said Sybil lightly, coming back from the dressing-table with a cigarette and sitting down again, "vat isn't my policy. I can come to a great many conclusions, Charles, as you know, and still hold my tongue."

"When it suits you." He met her glance almost boldly.

"Of course. What uvver reason could one have for holding it?" She looked at him with a sort of fond amusement, quite her old self again, spinning her methodical web. "Isabella's not happy at present, but she's at least preoccupied. Vere's nuffing to be gained, at vis moment, by disturbing vat preoccupation."

Charles gazed at her blankly, with a sense of the ground growing hollow under his feet.

"I'm not prejudiced, I fink," she went on. "I see Isabella as she is, and I see vat she has ve'y much to recommend her. She's an exceedingly attractive woman, Charles. She knows how to present herself. And she's not penniless. In fact," she wound up confidently, "vere might be a school of fought—perhaps more in Amer-

ica van here—taking a view vat she'd been raver frown away up to ve present."

Charles stared.

"I see what you mean," he said, feeling his breath come and go.

"So you see," said Sybil, quite as if it had been satisfactorily arranged between them, "vat's why I don't want her upset, at vis particular juncture. I fink it's essential you should come to Liverpool, and see us off. Not to do so might easily cause a hitch, and vere's nuffing to be gained by being caught in England, where I fear everyfing's likely to be ve'y boring for a long, long time."

"I see," said Charles again, and closed his eyes against the smoke of his cigarette, so as not to have to look at Sybil. He was seized by so many surprising thoughts at once that he hardly knew what to consider first, though aware that he must think quickly. What it amounted to, then, was that he was being—well, *dropped*: and Sybil thought she was doing it all herself, and had not told Isabella. He should be glad, he told himself, for here was an unexpected aid to escape, and of course he would profit by it; but at the same time he was absurdly disconcerted to learn that it was not he who was escaping at all, but Isabella—though without knowing it as yet, hidden in blind unconsciousness under her mother's wing. The thing that he found he *was* glad of—though again this was absurd—was that Isabella didn't know it, that she hadn't, yet, discussed it all with Sybil and agreed that he was a bad bargain. He felt that when the time did come, in America, for final revelation, she might give some trouble; but he also felt that Sybil would be more than equal to it, and wouldn't make a single false step in steering Isabella on the course she had chosen. He saw it, that course, in sudden illumination. Isabella was to marry again, in America, and do far better. It was all quite obvious and easy. Sybil had the example of her own good fortune to give her confidence: at forty-five or thereabouts she had married her millionaire; and Isabella at thirty-eight, good-looking, expert, with all the abounding advantage of Sybil's presentation, would be a comparatively simple proposition. He assented, not without chagrin, to the surprising scene, identifying his own part in it as something which

had to be gently brushed aside—a pity, a likeable person, but a failure.

“Vere’s one fing, however,” said Sybil, when she had waited through a reasonable pause and saw that he had nothing immediately to offer, “which you may not have fought of distinctly—and vat’s Philip.”

“What about him?” he said, detecting her shade of anxiety.

“Well . . . if he goes to America now, it may be years, you know.”

She did not say, “I suppose you realise you’re losing your son for good,” but he understood it as clearly as though she had, and now for the first time looked full in the face of that certainty.

There was a short silence, in which he considered and admitted several things, and finally summed them up and found that they amounted to a choice: between Philip and Eileen.

“Oh,” he said, “I quite agreed that Isabella should take him if she wanted to. After all, that’s really her sole object in going.”

Sybil smiled and nodded, taking his point.

“Of course,” she said.

So Philip had been considered and relinquished, after what Charles had to admit to himself was an unnaturally brief struggle.

“Ven vere’s only ve question of Miriam,” said Sybil, taking another cigarette out of a blue paper packet and lighting it from her old one. She puffed a cloud of smoke. “We’ve had a lot of trouble, vese last few days, from vat quarter.”

“I know. She’s set her heart on not going, and I think she ought to be allowed to stay behind. I said as much to Isabella this morning, but she seemed quite determined.”

“Well, you see,” said Sybil, drooping her eyelids with a trace of irony, “if Isabella’s going to America for ve children’s sake, she finks vey ought to go too. It’s only logical.”

“Yes, but Miriam’s old enough to have feelings about it, and they happen to be very strong. Also—let’s admit it, Sybil—Isabella isn’t really at all fond of the child. So she’s evidently insisting on taking her for some other reason.”

“Oh, I dare say she has anuvver reason.”

“And you know quite well she’ll regret it when she gets her there. She’ll wish she’d left her with me.”

"Vere's somefing in vat." Sybil looked at him musingly, feeling her way, and he sensed that on this point she was absolutely at one with him—that the presence of Miriam in California, for whatever punitive motive Isabella had carried her there, would be nothing but a dreary blot on the smiling landscape.

"Well," said Charles, feeling that here at least he could safely hand himself over, "suggest something, Sybil. I'm sure you can manage it."

"Oh I can manage it, Charles, if you don't mind, just for once, being ve least little bit rufeless."

They actually smiled at one another on this, but Sybil was immediately grave again, and perfectly decorous.

"Well . . . I should cancel her passage, by telephone. I can do vat if you like. And ven, after lunch, you can tell Miriam to make herself scarce—send her to ve Natural History Museum or somefing. Ven we'll manage Isabella between us. We'll bring her round on ve train."

Her last words struck on his memory like a gong, and he got up, visibly startled.

"I can't come to Liverpool with you, Sybil. I'm awfully sorry."

"My dear Charles, you must! Vere's really a limit to how badly you can behave. You can't just let Isabella leave for America like vat, wivout seeing her off. Have some imagination, Charles. Especially after Ireland."

They exchanged a long look, in which something was said on both sides which was never uttered. Charles's look said, quite plainly enough for Sybil, "Can't you see that everything depends on my not leaving London?" And hers, sternly and deeply bent on him with all the force of her will, "Unless you keep it up till the last minute, Isabella will suspect something and refuse to go—and my plan will be ruined. . . . Yours, too," she added presently, still without speaking, but allowing herself the beginnings of a smile, the dawning triumph of a chess-player in the last second before his adversary realises the completeness of the mate.

"When does the boat sail?" said Charles at last, now gloomily reduced to calculations.

"Midnight. You'll get plenty of trains back to London. You can hardly need to be back in town before breakfast."

"No, but . . . I shall have to make sure of the trains."

"Well, do so, by all means." She pointed to the bedside telephone, and went and stood in the window, smoking rapidly, while he rang up the station.

"Well?" she said, when finally he had put down the instrument and stood considering.

"There's only the eight-fifteen tomorrow morning. I could hardly catch the twelve-thirty, if I stay till the boat leaves. . . ."

"Which you *must* do."

"And there's nothing in between."

"Well, won't the eight-fifteen do? What time does it get to Euston?"

"Twelve fifty-eight."

"*Well?*" said Sybil again, on a note of impatience.

He frowned at the telephone for a moment, and then met her eye.

"It's cutting it a bit fine."

"Well, *cut* it fine, my dear Charles. It can't be all *vat* important."

There was nothing to be said to this, unless he told her everything, and his old experience of her warned him in a most positive voice that this would still be dangerous. Besides, their conversation, in which nothing and everything had so carefully been said, proved to him that for the carrying out of her plan she didn't want to know. Even for Sybil, it seemed, there were limits to concealment; even she must find it sometimes more comfortable to act on a basis of assumed ignorance. She knew, of course, really, everything; and as he stood by the telephone, considering, it flashed on him with ironical surprise that his superstitious dread of her perception, his old sense of her penetrating watchfulness, had been well founded. This visit of hers, once she had caught the whiff of concealed trouble, had been devoted to the most scrupulous research, and now she had formed her conclusions and was acting on them. She had seen him, after an interval of years, as still held to Isabella by the lightest and most insecure of threads; what she had once, ten years ago, shored up and repaired in so masterly a fashion was still unsatisfactory, unreliable; she had seen it tottering. And she was a realist, as she had said; and after watching him, after sounding him at every point and in smiling silence allowing the atmos-

phere of his married life to act on her intuitions, she had decided to lift Isabella clean away while there was still time and set her down for a fresh start in new and rich and splendidly auspicious American surroundings. All this he saw: Sybil had all along, once she had formed her impression, been manipulating with a sure touch, and the only new and unfamiliar thing in this was that it was not so much himself as Isabella who was being skilfully handled. It just showed the scale and confidence of her operations that she had resisted any weak desire she might have felt to let Isabella know what she was doing. She had worked largely in the dark and always alone, and he found himself regarding her at last with terrified admiration.

"Well," he said at length, meeting her watchful gaze, "I suppose it can be done." The calculation he had had to make was simple enough—could he get from Euston to the Café Royal in the space of an hour? Obviously he could—unless, of course, he broke his leg on the way or fell into any of the other unlikely accidents of which his oversensitised premonitory sense still warned him. And against that, of course, he would protect himself by contact with Aubrey, with Geoffrey and Iris, with the Rovedinos. It would be madness, for the sake of sitting in London for twenty-four hours and watching the clock, to throw away the marvellous safe-conduct which Sybil offered him.

He pressed out his cigarette in the ashtray and gave her a wan smile. He became aware for the first time that he was tired, but everything was falling most undeservedly into place, and he had a sense that he had only to gather himself now for a last endurance, for a few hours of Isabella's speech and eyes, for the dreadful deceiving friendliness of the boat train—and the thing was done. And it was Sybil—greatest miracle of all—who had smoothed his path. She would carry him powerfully through.

He yawned and stretched himself and prepared to go.

"Go and have a barf, poor boy," she said, now complacently indulging him. "You'll feel ever so much better. You'll cope wiv everyfing."

"I suppose I ought to ring up the shipping office first." He lingered irresolutely before her travelling clock.

"I'll do it for you, Charles. I'll arrange everyfing. You just give

Miriam her sealed orders, and ven make yourself useful and agreeable until it's time to go. I'll take ve blame, if blame vere be. You've nuffing whatever to worry about."

He smiled at her almost cheerfully.

"Thank you for—so very characteristically—solving the difficulty about Miriam. And . . . for other things as well," he added, with sudden embarrassment. He met her look quite frankly for the first and last time. "I must say I even admire you."

She pushed him to the door, laughing.

"Oh, admire me always, of course," she said, thrusting him forth with good humour; "but don't fank me too soon, my poor Charles."

There was something in her voice which was probably only the note of her old irony. In another person it might have been compunction.

10. What had she meant by it? For the thousandth time, next day, Charles asked himself this question, with increasing wildness, gripping the taxi's padded strap, staring with strained eyes through the window, flinging himself back on the seat in a silence that was more anguished than a scream.

Did Sybil plan this? Is this her parting gift to me, the exquisite joke which will keep her secretly content all the way to California?

Christ, we've missed the lights again. . . . Shall I get out and run?

He looked at his watch, leaned forward and with a bang opened the communicating window.

"Can't you go round some other way? This traffic's frightful!"

"Pretty much the same everywhere," said the man placidly. "Wouldn't gain much going round, I don't think. Try it if you like."

There was a noise of gears, and the stream moved haltingly forward. Charles remained crouched on the edge of the seat, as though the cab could be urged more rapidly by the sheer weight and posture of his body. They were actually moving, grinding round the corner of Oxford Circus into Regent Street. He caught sight of a clock, and flung himself backwards with a groan.

Twenty-five minutes past three. . . .

It didn't matter, it couldn't, now—but *had* she planned it? God, what a futile question; even Sybil didn't know, had no means of

knowing, that the train would be two hours late. It was the sort of thing that never happened, in England; one never dreamed of it. Sybil was everything that one furiously believed; but she wasn't that. She wasn't supernatural. She couldn't have guessed, in insisting on his presence at the boat, in Liverpool, that the result would be his missing whatever it was he had set his heart on in London.

But *had* she?

Oh, it didn't matter, he didn't care what Sybil had thought or intended. The only thing that mattered in the world was whether Eileen would wait. If she had waited, then she had already maintained her faith in him for an hour and a half. It wasn't much to ask. But an hour and a half could be prodigious; it could be a lifetime; it was long enough for asking oneself the crucial question over and over again, and arriving at the wrong answer.

And if she had so arrived, what next? Every avenue was closed to him. As though Sybil had cast her spell over them, each one of his solid alternatives, all his precautionary second strings, had dissolved mockingly at a touch. He looked back over his last hours in London, trying vainly to see where it was he had gone wrong, what else he could have done to make them hold; and was still at a loss. He might, perhaps, as each one had snapped in turn under the lightest pressure, have refused to go to Liverpool after all. Yes, and where would *that* have landed him? Besides, he was helpless. It was nothing that he had done or not done that had started the general crumbling and disintegration; it was external and in the air; it was the tumbril roar; it was the steady mounting of a diffused fever, of which the lateness of the Liverpool to London train, its long silent unexplained pauses between empty fields when the passengers wandered uneasily into the corridors and let the windows down and asked no questions, the unnaturally solid air of the police at the terminus, the crocodiles of labelled children, carrying bundles—little cardboard suitcases, packets of food, parcels—had been only the easily noted, the surface symptoms.

It had shown a little more clearly in his contact with Aubrey, and to this, perhaps, he thought, making a despairing backward sweep over that day of frustration, he ought to have brought a more ruthless imagination, he ought to have insisted. Aubrey's voice had sounded so anxious, so relieved; he had simply spluttered

into the telephone on hearing Charles, and before he had had time to know what might be required of him had swept everything out of the question but his own special urgency. Aubrey had been simply desperate for Charles's word. Aubrey wanted the day off; it was terribly important. He had a friend who knew a man who had arranged an interview, and it was a matter of hours, of life and death, and something to do with getting a job in a ministry. Well, it sounded unlikely enough, but Aubrey had been full of it, talking very fast with his special persuasive intonation, which always meant that there was temporarily no intelligence to spare for any matter but his own: and Charles had mentally cancelled him out, having still other possibilities untried, and said "All right, then . . . yes . . . go and see about it if you want to"; and had gone on in a methodical way to the Rovedinos.

It was at this point, sitting alone in the little upstairs room, before the telephone, conscious of the rushing and banging on the floors below him, that he had been touched by panic. The Rovedinos were in Scotland. Certainly, sir, the butler said, letters would be forwarded; but he had no instructions about giving their present address. He believed Mr. and Mrs. Rovedino were moving about, would soon be in Inverness: but as to the date of their return, that too was uncertain. He ventured to think it depended on the situation.

So only the Pillows remained, and through several prolonged attempts he heard nothing but the telephone ringing and ringing in their flat, with nobody to answer. He had tried at intervals, through what was left of the morning, without result; and after lunch, in the last impossible few minutes when the taxi was at the door and Isabella's trunks were going down, had tried again, and heard the ringing miraculously interrupted, and a strange voice, most weirdly out of breath, croaking "'Allaoh? 'Allaoh?'"

It must have been Iris's daily, apparently unused to the apparatus and terribly on her guard; one would never have thought that mere question and answer could have been exchanged with such difficulty. But it had got through at last, with unanswerable fatal flatness. The Pillows were out. No, she didn't know where Mr. Pillow was. Mrs. Pillow, she thought, after a pause, was out doing her shopping. No, she didn't know when she would be back. She

couldn't say, she was sure. She suggested he might try again at tea-time.

"Can you take a message?" Charles had shouted, almost but not quite sure that he had just heard Isabella calling from the first landing.

"A what?"

"A message. For Mrs. Pillow. Can you write it *down*?"

Yes, distinctly, now, it was Isabella's voice, and somebody, probably Doddy, was coming upstairs. Through the open window, patiently, gently, he could hear the taxi throbbing.

"Well . . . if you like," said the voice, sounding most guarded, most doubtful.

And then there had been the appalling difficulty of what to say. He had shouted his own name, repeated it, spelt it, and then in despair—hearing their voices winding all over the house—had given what was probably an unintelligible message after all. "Tell Mrs. Pillow—if anything happens—I'm *relying* on her as a *friend*."

There had been no time for more, not even to make sure whether these cryptic words had been lucidly received. He had had to rush downstairs, flurried, apologetic, outwardly helpful, relying on Sybil to turn the conversation and conceal the fact that he had risked their missing the train.

The taxi stopped with a jerk, almost touching the back of a bus.

"Lights against us," said the driver cheerfully, rocking a little from side to side in his seat, as though to show his personal willingness. Charles's endurance broke.

"Here," he said, jumping out into the maze of stationary traffic and shoving a couple of half-crowns into the man's hand. He dodged nimbly to the pavement and began to run, colliding, swerving, gasping apologies as he brushed between placid loiterers and people who seemed all intent on strolling four abreast, and finally, when he had got through the stream of cars at a crossing, abandoning the pavement altogether and making a rapid undignified progress, half walking, half running, holding his hat, almost under the wheels of buses and just out of the gutter.

The Café Royal's revolving door resisted him, and he had a moment, waiting for the unhurried emergence of some solid women, to regain his breath and clear his swimming vision before the doors moved round and he came to a standstill on the carpet.

She was not there.

He walked aimlessly forward, sweeping with a blind stare the people sitting with crossed knees on the plush chairs and sofas, the few women waiting, gripping fox furs and handbags, with their backs to the mirrors. Everybody seemed, as they always did here, to be patiently in attendance: but Eileen was not among them.

He went quickly round to the bookstall, looked in the telephone boxes, surveyed the foot of the stairs. There was nobody he knew. He repeated this manoeuvre several times, going back to the door and peering into the street, and then, on an inspiration which for a moment seemed likely to be happy, looking in at the half-empty brasserie. There were still a few couples lingering over the late end of lunch, and some men filed past him in the doorway, buttoning their jackets, breathing round the butts of their cigars; but there were not so many that he could not, putting on his spectacles, in the space of fifty seconds examine them all. None of them was Eileen.

Deceiving himself now with his own briskness, he went to the telephone, consulted his diary and rang up the Gower Street number. No, Miss Oram wasn't there. Yes, she'd called that morning, but unfortunately they hadn't had a room, and she'd gone away again. No, they had no address. She hadn't left a message. They thought it very unlikely that she would be coming back.

He waited a moment in the box, breathing heavily, then fished up some more coppers and rang the Pillows. No answer to that appeal. He let it ring for a little, swallowing from time to time to have his voice ready; but after a time, as he listened, the tone became charged with a suggestive difference—the unbearable crying monotony of a telephone ringing unheard in an empty house.

And perhaps, as he stood there hidden, she had returned . . . ?

He went back to the entrance, hurrying as though to find himself mistaken, to see her in some obscure corner after all, to exclaim, to stride hastily over the carpet, to explain his lateness. But before he had reached the middle of the foyer the stillness of de-

feat came down on him; he hesitated, became aware of the detached faintly hostile interest of several pairs of eyes, and made his way humbly to an empty sofa.

For a long time he sat there, unable to think, held in a trance of suspense which had no expectancy in it, and referred only to the length of time he could go on sitting without admitting it was hopeless. He looked often at his watch, and each time the door turned, or he caught the muffled tread of a late luncher—replete, important, hurrying off to capture what remained of the afternoon—he turned his head; but it was without hope now; the action was mechanical; and after a time there was nothing left to look at. He was quite alone.

At four o'clock he stood up, and on a sudden flickering up of hope went to the telephone. He dialled the Pillows' number and waited, keeping his eyes fixed on the glass window, listening to the now hatefully familiar ringing with a shivering determination to stand there until it stopped.

Too much of my life is spent in waiting . . . in telephone boxes . . . taxis . . . trains . . . in the lobbies of strange hotels . . .

This is the last time. I can't stand any more.

Or shall I recover from this numbness; shall I go out into the street at last, deciding what to do; shall I walk about, looking at faces in the street; shall I go home, be still?

A waiter passed the box, and then another. He shifted his position, letting his eyes follow their retreating backs.

The second figure stopped irresolutely at the bookstall, hesitated, turned; he found himself gazing at a profile which suggested meaning, a familiar nose, a jutting crag of hair. . . .

He slammed down the telephone with a convulsive movement, missed the receiver, dropped it and left it swinging.

"Geoffrey!"

The big man turned fully round to him and caught his arm.

"Charles! My God—you *are* here!"

His friendly ugly face gaped oddly, grinned, went red with pleasure.

"Where is she?" said Charles, looking blindly past him.

"Why, here. I made her come back. She's in an awful state, Charlie—what *have* you been up to? Our char left Iris the most

extraordinary message—we hadn't the least idea what it meant until Eileen turned up. I say, she's in an awful state."

"Where is she?" said Charles again, shaking him off.

"I told you, here." He put his hand in Charles's arm and steered him for the lobby. "I hope we did the right thing? Iris went out and got a cab and made me bring her back. . . ."

They came out on the expanse of carpet, the empty waiting wilderness of seats and mirrors, and suddenly Charles saw her. She was sitting in the corner of a sofa, very still, staring at nothing, her face a narrow mask of frozen endurance.

The space between them wavered and lengthened as in a dream, but Geoffrey propelled him.

"I say," he called, "Eileen! I say . . . he's here!"

She waited a perceptible moment before she turned her head, and they saw, from the strange breaking up of terror and resolution in her face, that her last strength had gone into the effort to believe him.

"What happens to the people one has loved, and then let go?"

This is the question Charles Denham asks himself one evening, when Isabella, the wife with whom he has lived, not altogether happily, for almost fifteen years, comes upon some old letters in the attic of their house. His mind goes back to Eileen and to their abrupt and tragic parting ten years ago; to that weakness in himself which allowed the weight of marriage and convention, the delicate scheming of Sybil, his mother-in-law, and even, at the end, the desperation of Eileen herself, to come between them. The urge to see her again is strong upon him. Timidly at first, then with growing determination, he sets out to find her. With a wise and sympathetic humor Miss Lane traces his adventures on an obstacle race which takes him to the west of Ireland and reaches its climax, after some frantic sleuthing in Dublin, and some amazing taut suspense, in the little Irish village where Eileen's stock company is playing.

Where Helen Lies is a novel whose action springs directly from the interplay of character and situation; the exquisite Isabella, the devious and charming Sybil Gentry, the diffident Charles, rescued to the very last by circumstances—these are people who live on intimately in the mind. The emotions they experience, the events through which they move, have the fluid actuality of life.

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